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Cricket legend Solomons knows a thing or two about soccer

By Derek ROYAL

HARRY Solomons may be well known throughout the cricket community but he also boasts a good reputation in soccer circles.

The 55-year-old owns two cricket and soccer specialist stores - Kingsgrove Sports Centre at Kingsgrove and Parramatta-based Kingsgrove Sports Centre Westside.

Originally from Sri Lanka, Solomons represented his country's youth soccer team but like most boys in the island nation, he gravitated to the national sport of cricket.

Solomons migrated to Australia several years ago and a stint as a prison guard reinforced his love for sport.

"I was a prison guard and then I worked my way up through the ranks and was given a job as an activities officer in charge of sport at Long Bay Jail," Solomons told *Soccer Today*.

"So, as an activities officer, I got prisoners playing cricket and played a little bit of soccer with the prison's team.

"I had to buy sports gear for the prison and in Kingsgrove, there used to be a little sports store that was going broke.

"The guy who owned it was getting out of the retail business and moving into soccer wholesale so I asked him if I could buy his shop.

"He said no but he suggested I take his building and start my own business.

"So that's how it started.

"I got a loan for $5,000, I sold my car for $4,000 and I started the business for a total of $9,000."

From small pickings - the store was no bigger than half the size of a regular-sized office, Kingsgrove Sports now does $6 million worth of business in just soccer and cricket, and has two shops with up to 40 employees.

Solomons and business just seemed to go hand-in-hand and he decided to specialise in cricket and soccer.

"My final vision was one of opening a very big cricket and soccer store, with a cricket academy and a cricket museum.

About a decade ago, Solomons moved down the road to the current head office facility at Kingsgrove, which boasts 8,000 square feet, and within a year or two of relocating, Kingsgrove Sports' name and reputation had blossomed.

"We were doing OK," says Solomons, "then we opened a shop in Parramatta, to cover the western suburbs, which is called Kingsgrove Sports West Side."

Solomons said that while he followed soccer and knew the game inside-out, in terms of doing business, his interest was in cricket.

"Cricket was and still is my major focus, but it just so happened that when I started the store we needed a winter sport to keep our business going and so it was natural that I went into soccer," Solomons said.

"And so that's how my involvement in the soccer business is."

Solomons said that while cricket was the store's focus, Kingsgrove Sports is: "quite recognised in soccer."

Harry Solomons flanked by Australian Test cricket stars Steve (right) and Mark Waugh

"We might not be as much involved in terms of profile and marketing because we are so involved and so big in cricket that our cricket season tends to go into the soccer season," Solomons says.

"But if you ask any major supplier and if you ask the more high profile suppliers of brand names in soccer, we have a good name.

"From what I understand, we are probably one of the bigger, or the biggest soccer shops in NSW, without even trying.

"It just so happens that our credibility, something which I have worked very hard to achieve, is very good and so people just happen to come and of course because we have the facilities in the sense that we have big shops, we have good displays and we have such things as warehouse and staff in places that we can do a good soccer storage.

"So, even though we don't consider ourselves as high profile soccer people, the people who are actually involved in soccer consider us important.

"We only deal with upmarket production - and we only sell name brands.

"What we mainly concentrate on is the individual sales.

"We provide the individual soccer customer that is the player, with name brands and good service, which is basically what they want and we are credible - we don't try to do behind the scenes or under the table deals - we are always ethical and our name is very important to us, and I think that that is why our soccer business is so successful.

Solomons' other claim to fame is his friendship with Steve and Mark Waugh, the Australian cricket twins considered two of the world's finest at the bat and ball game.

The Waughs once worked for Harry at Kingsgrove and he helped them get stints overseas, plus he also offered his assitance with their initial player contracts.

Solomons maintains his friendship with the Waugh boys to this day and from what he remembers of their youth, they were certainly different.

"They were so immersed with their sport, especially cricket and soccer, that they didn't really have a social life," Solomons says.

"They possessed excellent hand-eye coordination and were very good at ball-sports."

Indeed, both not only skipped through the cricket representative ranks, but they also represented New South Wales age-group soccer teams.

"They were excellent soccer players and I would not hesitate to add that had they chosen soccer over cricket, they would have had the same impact on soccer," Solomons says.

"They would have played overseas or at least National League level, they were that good."

Solomons adds that while the Waughs were twins, they were completely different people.

"Steve was very self-assured, very sure of himself," Solomons says.

"But Mark was a little more insecure. Steve knew what he was going to do with his life, even as a teenager. If anyone asked him what he was going to be, without blinking an eyelid, he'd say: 'I'm going to captain the Australian cricket team - he was that confident and that focused on his destiny."

Which, is of course, what steve Waugh has done, leading Australia to several gongs and awards in a distinguished career that is now in its twilight.

"Mark on the other hand was very easy-going and not so intense.

"But they were both excellent sportsmen and it has been a pleasure knowing them."

For now, Solomons, 55, reckons he has another five working years left in him and he's keen to sell his enterprise.

"I've taken the business as far as I can," he says, "and it has been an exciting road.

"Now it's time to put the feet up and hand it to someone with vision who can take the business to a new level."

"I'm not interested in selling to someone who just wants to maintain the business as it is."

And hasn't he set the bar high?

Pedj Bojic: Just call him the Real McCoy

By Derek ROYAL

THERE'S something about Parramatta Power youngster Pedj Bojic.

Maybe it's his quiet, intense demeanour.

Or maybe it's his composure when he's on the ball.

But then again, maybe it's just the fact that the 17-year-old seems destined to achieve at the highest level.

Bojic may be quiet but he oozes confidence, one bordering on arrogance, a useful blend that he hopes will take him as far as the national captaincy.

"I would love to captain Australia," Bojic told *Soccer Today*.

"There's no greater honour than captaining your country."

One gets the idea that when Pedj says he wants to captain Australia, he *means* he wants to captain Australia.

But to some, such ambitions should be left unsaid.

"To say such things, well, it's just not right," they say. "It's sheer arrogance."

But to Bojic, it's not arrogance and as far as he's concerned, all the critics can go get a life because he means what he says.

"I've always been taught to do my best and to believe in myself," he said.

"I've also been taught not to think that I'm too good because there's always younger guys coming through who want your position.

"That's one of things that spurs me on."

There is such a fine line between confidence and arrogance that one simply feeds off the other and of this Bojic has the maturity to realise.

He's not into bullshit, nor is he into make believe, Bojic is the Real McCoy.

So how did he get to be so confident?

Well, it all started at Warilla, a small town not far from Wollongong on the South Coast of New South Wales.

Bojic, an only-child, grew up with his father Mick and mother Geraldine.

Mick, of Serbian heritage and Geraldine, of Greek-Australian parentage, supported their son in his pursuit of the round ball game, firstly with Warilla, followed by the Illawarra Association reps, Wollongong Wolves, the NSW Institute of Sport and finally, Parramatta Power.

Bojic wants to really make a go of playing professional soccer and while the state Institute provided him with a wealth of experience, the apprenticeship program at Parramatta Power has also given him a golden opportunity to go all the way.

And he has already made a few appearances in first grade.

He credits the likes of Power skipper and former Australia captain Alex Tobin as one of the major influences on his career so far.

"Alex and the other experienced guys are great," Bojic said.

"They've been really helpful but at the end of the day I have to make my own way and find my own path to where I want to go."

Bojic last year enjoyed the thrill of playing for his country at the World Under 17 Championships in Trinidad and Tobago.

Grouped with the host nation, Brazil and Croatia, Australia reached the quarter-finals but suffered a 5-1 thrashing at the hands of eventual finalists Nigeria.

"It was a great experience," Bojic said.

Bojic is a fulltime player. He eats, sleeps and drinks the

"But the quarter-final against Nigeria was a disaster."

Bojic has since come on in leaps and bounds but the road hasn't been a smooth one.

With the blessing of his parents Pedj left home at a young age to pursue his soccer dream and while he did his best to remain focused, there *were* other distractions.

"I got into a bit of mischief," he said.

"Mostly stuff that teenagers normally get into, but now I know where I want to go and I'm totally committed to playing profesional football."

Bojic was last season offered a full-time apprenticehip with Parramatta Power.

Officially known as the Parramatta Power Apprenticeship Program, the scheme was launched in season 1999/2000 as a means of giving talented youngsters such as Bojic the opportunity to be a part of a professional club and to develop their skills for the future.

Ten apprentices were appointed in the first year of the program and each year about five are promoted and offered first grade contracts.

Chances are, Bojic, through sheer weight of his playing ability and his progress this season, will be offered a first grade contract for the 2002/03 season.

"By offering five apprentices first grade contracts this leaves five vacancies to be filled for the next season," says Power media manager Taghred Chandab.

"The apprentices are generally aged between 15 and 18, most have left school in Year 10 to pursue their dreams, while others have opted to finish Year 12 before taking up a one-year apprenticeship."

At the end of last season two apprentices were promoted to first grade, Brett Holman and Luke Roodenburg, several were released, while the remainder are playing in this year's gun youth league outfit that looks like specials to win the premiership.

What does it mean to be an apprentice?

"The apprentice program means the teenagers must study once a week at TAFE," Chandab says.

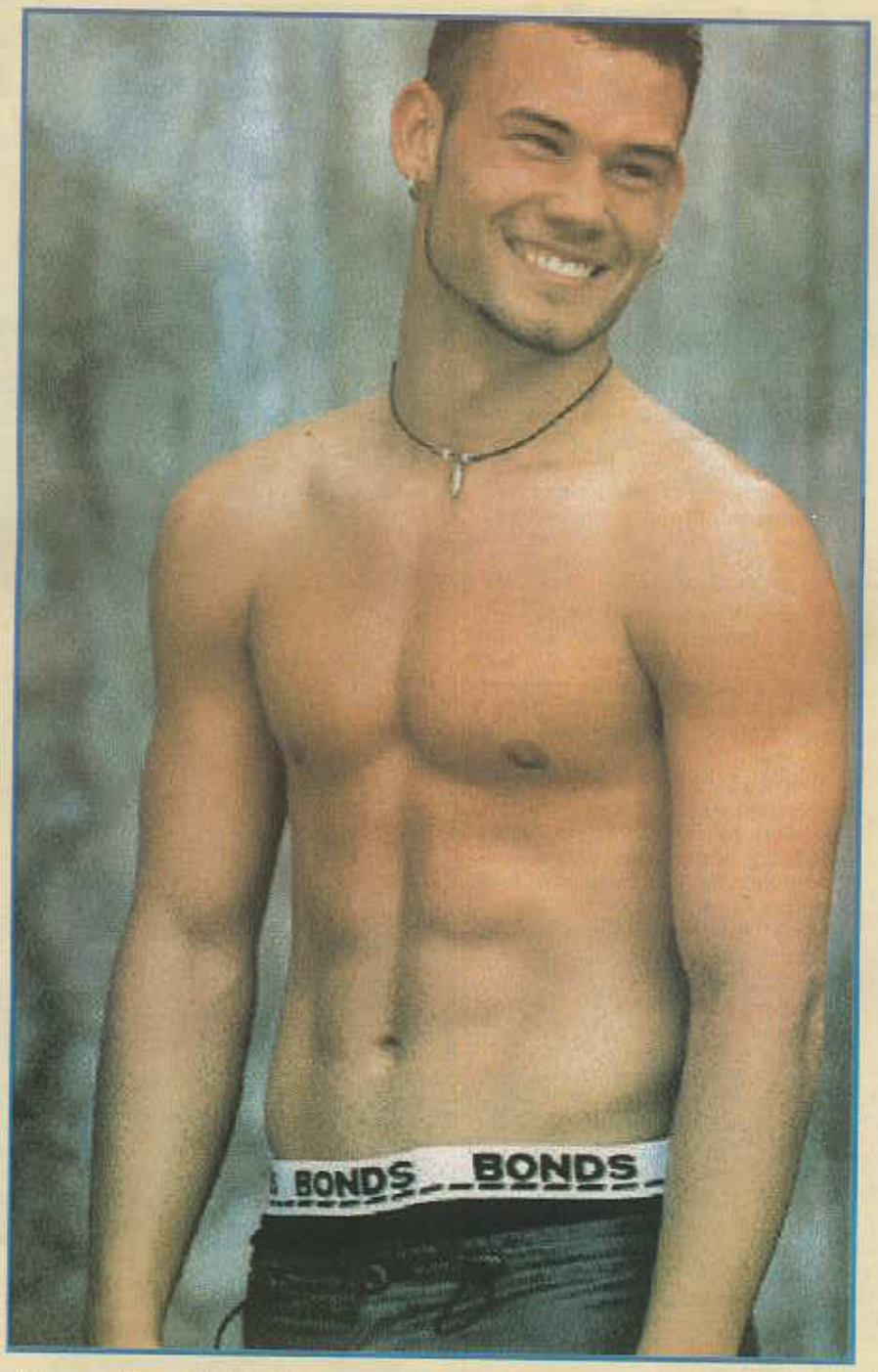
"This is paramount to their success at the club.

"If they do not pass their Sports Administration course they run the risk of losing their apprenticeship.

"It also means they must assist at training, setting up and packing equipment.

"They are also required to conduct themselves in a professional manner and dress appropriately."

The program was originally moulded on the European style but has since been revised.



"Parramatta prides itself on producing professional soccer players on and off the field," says Chandab.

"These teenagers are the future of the club and the game in this country and if they expect to play overseas then they must learn how to be professional."

So how does Chandab, who has developed the trust of most of the youngsters, see Pedj Bojic in the greater scheme of things?

"Pedj is a leader," she says.

"He is a great player and leads by example.

"His attitude is such that he hates to lose and he is supremely confident.

"But a lot of people resent that attitude, that mentality that is geared towards putting in the hard yards and honing a winning edge.

"A lot of people think that his ego is too big but in my opinion it's not because he has the goods."

Pedj Bojic isn't just a super soccer player.

He is also a marketers dream and as the picture on this page clearly illustrates, the young man has a natural appeal to women.

Power, through an aggressive marketing campaign, has used his wares quite well, offering him, along with Power teammate Steve Fitzsimmons as dates in a special Valentine's Day promotion that proved highly sucessful.

And in recent weeks Pedj was even chosen as a dream date by a female listener on *Today FM* who chose to enjoy a restaurant dinner with the rising star rather than her boyfriend.

So what does he think of all the off-field attention?

Distracting or otherwise?

"No, it's all a lot of fun," Bojic says.

"It's good for the club's profile and it's also good for me, because promotion is something that can come in handy further down the track."

While that's all very well, one gets the impression that if given the opportunity, Bojic would be on the first plane overseas.

After all, there are so many young Aussies doing the job in Europe that no-one would blame him if he simply became another statistic.

But in the meantime, he's valuable to Parramatta and the club is sure to continue using him wisely.

Putting his face in the community and having him come across as the "local boy made good".

"Pedj is a great example to kids," says Chandab.

"He has basically come from the wrong side of the tracks and has proved that through soccer he can make something of himself."

Wrong side of the tracks?

"What I mean by that is that it is very difficult leaving home at 15 or 16 and living with other guys in a strange environment," Chandab says.

"Like most teenagers Pedj has done a few wayward things but now he's on track to achieving a dream.

"He's also studying hard and he's really doing his bit for the club.

"If other youngsters can see Pedj doing well, they might think 'hey, if he can do it, then so can I' and that would make the entire program a success.

"All it takes is for one kid to break through and the others will follow."

Bojic will this weekend return to youth league action after being suspended for two weeks and he can't wait to don the Power jersey.

Parramatta has dominated the competition from go to whoa and Bojic would just love to help the boys win a premiership.

"Yeah, that would be something special," he says.

"Winning the premiership with your mates is a great accomplishment because you play with them all season, you socialise with them and you know them better than anyone.

"Yeah, that *would* be special."

With the goal of captaining Australia not too far from his mind, the boy from Warilla is certainly receiving the right guidance in Sydney's west.

And as they say: "believe in something enough and chances are, you'll achieve your ultimate dreams.

Pedj Bojic may just do that.

Vieri silences the knockers

By Andrew DAMPF

ROME, Italy - Internazionale star Christian Vieri plays on a team sitting in first place in the Italian soccer league.

He is considered by many to be Italy's best forward and is nearly assured of landing a spot in his country's starting lineup for the approaching World Cup.

So when "Bobo," as the burly forward is known, skipped Italy's World Cup warmup match against England last Wednesday with a leg injury, he surely did not expect to be criticised. After all, it was only a friendly, as he has kept repeating in the days since.

But when the striker announced he would return to Inter's lineup just a few days later and scored in a 1-0 victory over Fiorentina Saturday, many fans and the media wondered about that injury.

The suggestion was that Vieri was saving himself for Inter's last league games and the UEFA Cup.

The leading critic was Francesco Sensi, president of rival and second placed AS Roma.

"He doesn't play for the national team, and then he plays for Inter. It depends on the (importance of the game)," Sensi said to reporters Saturday.

Sensi's club missed captain Francesco Totti in a 3-1 win at Bologna Saturday after the striker was injured against England.

"Take care of your own affairs," Vieri said when asked about Sensi's comments after the win in Florence.

"Think about your team and only speak about that, not about Vieri or Inter.

"I don't accept comments or interference from anyone," Vieri said to reporters after the game, stressing that he is much more wary of injuries now after missing nearly all of his first season with Inter due to injury.

"Now every time I feel a little something, I stop myself," Vieri said.

"Now, is that strange?

"I don't risk my health for the national team or for Inter," Vieri said.

Inter's author of 20 goals this season will likely play next in Inter's UEFA Cup semifinal match against Feyernoord of Rotterdam on Thursday.

Sensi's anger has been brewing since Inter defeated Roma the previous week to move three-points clear at the top of the Serie A standings.

With only five games to play, Inter controls its own destiny and the team's coach, Hector Cuper, wants his team to focus on the remaining games.

"We must understand the title is within reach," Cuper said. "And this must be our principal stimulus."

Vieri seems to be listening to his coach carefully.

"Let's talk about the league now, there's plenty of time before the World Cup," he said recently.

And after Saturday's game, his sentiments were similar: "I don't intend to risk the end of the season for a friendly, even if it's an important one," Vieri said.

The strong words from one of the league's mightiest players coincide

with Vieri's on-field demeanour, a style of play featuring reckless abandon unusual for Italians - possibly something to do with the fact Vieri learned to play the game in Australia, where he lived for years. Vieri's next chance to Italy comes April 17 in Milan the Azzurri" host Uruguay.

EUREKA - PROFESSOR DISCOVERS THAT SOCC *IS* ACTUALLY SAFER THAN RUGBY

EVEN THOUGH rugby union is generally seen as more physical than soccer, a recent scientific study now proves the world's most played sport is safer than rugby.

FIFA's F-Marc Committee chaired by Professor Jiri Dvorak did the study, which looked at the likelihood of injury in both sports, in training and in competition. A report based on this study was presented to a sports medicine conference in Los Angeles, USA.

The study has also been accepted and published by the American Journal of Sports Medicine.

The idea spawned from a call in 1994 by current FIFA president, Joseph Sepp Blatter, to "reduce the frequency of injuries, and symptoms, at all levels of play." Professor Dvorak told rugby union and soccer officials at a symposium in Auckland, on Tuesday 26th March, that it was the first time in the history of sports medicine that the two sports had been compared using the "same methodology." The study was done in New Zealand, with some background data collated in Europe. However, the actual comparison was done last year in New Zealand using boys aged between 14-18 years of age, playing in youth teams. During the course of data collation, other sports such as handball and field hockey were also compared to soccer and were both found to have a higher rate of injury.

But when compared to rugby, the main findings of the study showed there was a higher rate of injury in rugby affecting upper-body limbs such as shoulder, neck and head. In fact, neck injuries made up 19% of all injuries suffered by the 124 players studied. Instances of neck injuries in soccer only rated 1% of the total injury rate. Soccer had a higher rate of injury compared to rugby in the lower leg area, mainly ankle also found out that rugby pl tended to play more with mi injuries, which led to more s cases. The conclusions found to be far more prevalent wit injuries, compared to soccer suggested better technique i was needed, not only for rug soccer as well. It was also s more quality time was neede training in relation to playing and that players did not carr onto the playing arena. Hea was recommended to those rugby.

TALKING SOCCER WITH ALEX TOBIN

Parramatta Power still in the race for the Finals

ALEX Tobin is Australia's most capped international player and since making his National League debut for Adelaide City in 1984, he has played more NSL games than anyone. Now into his second season as Parramatta Power skipper, Tobin continues to set records that are unlikely to be broken. This week Alex offers SOCCER TODAY readers his thoughts on the final round and the upcoming Playoff series.

THE Finals are a week away and in a gripping finale to the competition the final spot in the post-season is still up for grabs.

Four teams, South Melbourne, Northern Spirit, Marconi and of course Parramatta Power all have a chance to make it, but a lot is dependent on the match between South Melbourne and Marconi.

If South prevail then regardless of the other outcomes they will hang on to the sixth and final spot.

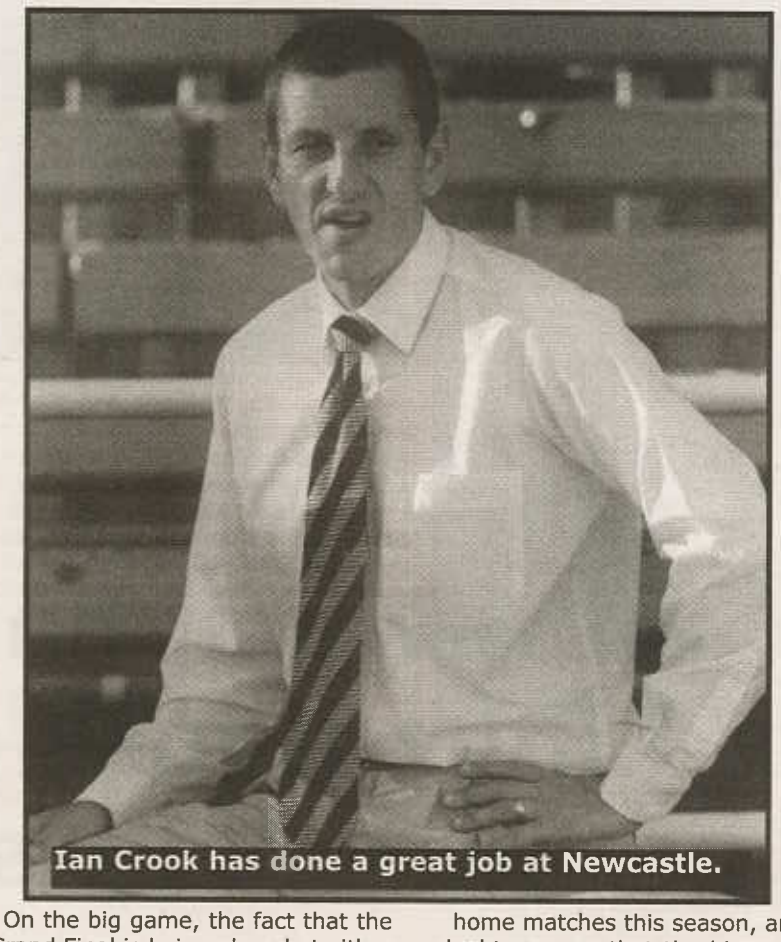
South would have to rate as probably the hottest side in the league at the moment and if they do make it to the finals they could be one to watch.

Of course they'd have to deny overwhelming favourites Perth Glory, who with a doubt have been the most consistent side all season.

Whilst other sides have all had their fair share of ups and downs, you can't deny Glory who have just maintained their focus throughout the season, and no matter who makes it to the finals they will need to put in an Herculean effort to overcome the West Australians.

However one of the most important things to remember is that finals football is different to regular season matches.

Gripping affairs, they have a tendency to surprise so the possibility of any team, one through to six, qualifying for the big game is not out of the question.



Ian Crook has done a great job at Newcastle.

On the big game, the fact that the Grand Final is being played at either Perth or Newcastle this season is a huge lift for the game.

It's a just reward for supporters in both cities who have attended their home matches this season, and no doubt ensures that the biggest day in Australian soccer will be a great spectacle.

Perth have been the benchmark in terms of home crowd figures in recent times, the revival of Newcastle would have to rate as one of the biggest highlights this season.

Finishing as wooden spooners last season, (excluding Eastern Pride) Newcastle have turned it around this year and the people of Newcastle have really got behind them.

Ian Crook, his staff and players should be congratulated on their performance this season.

So to should Brisbane who have also put behind the disappointment of last season, and performed above most people's expectations.

They have been the quiet achievers of the NSL this season.

FINALLY I'd like to sign off by commenting on our own preparations for what we're hoping won't be our last game of the season.

The fact that we've had the week off, as well as the Easter break ensures that everyone is fresh and keen to get out onto the park.

At this stage of the season, there is no chance that the time off will affect our fitness, and despite the odd Easter Egg or two the boys will be as fit as ever.

Everyone is fairly relaxed, and upbeat knowing that we have everything to play for. We are confident we can get a result and after winning our last two matches, the mood within the squad is very uplifting.

AUSSIES ABROAD

LUKE Wilkshire and Brad Jones have signed new deals with Middlesbrough that will keep them at the club till 2004.

THIRTY-TWO-year old goalkeeper Andy Petterson has joined West Bromwich Albion until the end of the season. The Baggies have taken over Petterson's Portsmouth contract, which is due to expire at the end of the season.

SOCCEROO MARK SCHWARZER missed Middlesbrough's two games over the Easter weekend due to a virus he picked up during the week.

HARRY KEWELL was forced off early in Leeds United's match against Manchester United after sustaining an ankle injury. He required six stitches to a gash in his leg and was forced to miss the match against Tottenham on Monday.

KEVIN MUSCAT (Wolves) and DANNY TIATTO (Manchester City) missed both of their team's matches over the Easter weekend due to suspension. Wolves and City met on Easter Monday to virtually decide the 1st Division Champions for 2002, with City winning 2-0.

CENTRE-back SEAN COONEY was absent through injury when Coventry City's reserves lost 1-4 at Ipswich Town (21/02/02) recently. He also missed the more recent 1-4 away loss to Southampton (26/03/02)

BIRMINGHAM City goalkeeper CLINT DAVIES was on the bench when the clubs reserves played Tranmere Rovers (27/03/02) in the Avon Insurance League. Davies is currently negotiating a new two-year contract with the Blues.

AUSTRALIA Under-20 international BRAD JONES was between the posts when Middlesbrough's reserves came from behind to defeat Blackburn Rovers (20/03/02) 2-1 away from home recently.

Courtesy Soccer Australia

Viduka laughs at Spanish rumours

AUSTRALIA striker Mark Viduka has laughed off reports that Deportivo La Coruna is ready to pay £30million ($A81million) for his services before adding that he is happy at Elland Road.

"It is part of football that players are bought and sold and changes are made but I am happy at Leeds," he said.

"As I've said before I enjoy life up there, I love the club, the city and the fans and hopefully it won't come to this."

"Deportivo must have a lot of money if they can bid that sort of amount but I know nothing about this offer and it's all just rumours."

The Primera Liga side's coach Javier Irureta has admitted that the Socceroos star is his prime target should Spanish international Diego Tristan leave the Riazor at the end of the season.

Mark Viduka (left) laughs at Spanish rumours

After a goal drought of 11 games, Viduka has scored in Leeds' last two Premiership matches but his goals could not help lift the Yorkshire side to victory.

He scored his 15th goal of the season in the 2-1 defeat at Tottenham on Easter Monday, a result tha all but ends the Champions League hopes of David O'Leary's men.

The Australian inter national shrugged of the setback but pron ised that Leeds will continue to strive for European spot.

Viduka said: "We're very disappointed wi the result at Spurs a we felt we should ha had an equaliser tha we deserved.

"We've given away two silly goals again and we need to regr now as the players h don't want to be involved in the Intertoto Cup and co ing back early from c summer break, so w now have to work ha to make sure we qua for Europe directly."

AAP

SA wash hands of Kingz-South dispute over Boutsianis

SOCCER Australia last week confirmed that the dispute between Kingz FC and South Melbourne, regarding the eligibility of player Con Boutsianis, who participated in the Round 15 NSL match between the clubs, would not proceed to a Tribunal.

Acting Chief Executive Officer of Soccer Australia Greg Bates, advised that the matter had been considered by the Legal Committee of Soccer Australia, which is chaired by Mr Greg Woods.

The Legal Committee continues to hold the view that the matter requires resolution through the legal process, and not throu Soccer Australia's Tribunal system.

FRANCIS AWARITEFE *writes* Football

FIFA WORLD CUP ... The lead-in to the Finals

IN A SERIES of articles leading to World Cup 2002, Francis Awaritefe looks at the credentials of the countries competing for football's Holy Grail.

THE countdown to the FIFA World Cup 2002 has started in earnest and I, like most fans out there cannot wait to gorge myself on a month long feast of top class action.

Africa is looking very strong with five representatives competing for the first time in World Cup history.

The five African teams are Cameroon, Senegal, Nigeria, South Africa and Tunisia.

All of these countries have performed very well at previous World Cup.

The Africans have top class players performing in the European leagues, and for the first time I believe that they are a genuine threat to the traditional powers of world football in Europe and South America.

Cameroon, Nigeria and even Senegal are capable of making it to the quarter or perhaps Semi-final stage of the tournament.

The only weakness I see in the African teams is the lack of stability and the propensity to self-destruct before big tournaments.

There is also a history of disunity between players, which ultimately wrecks the team's chance of performing cohesively.

Nigeria has disbanded the nucleus of the squad that played in the last World Cup and is now looking to rebuild its squad with younger players. A ridiculous move given the World Cup is only two months away.

South Africa has sacked its South American coach Carlos Quieroz, after he refused to let the technical director Jomo Sono pick the team. Tunisia has also joined the orgy of sackings with the departure of Frenchman Henry Michel who guided the North Africans to World Cup qualification.

South America is not looking as formidable as previous World Cups.

Argentina is the standout team in South America, they dominated the World Cup qualification and easily finished on top of their group.

Paraguay has performed very solidly to emerge as the second best team in South America.

Ecuador is very underrated however they are no slouch having finished ahead of countries with the pedigree of Brazil and Uruguay.

Brazil is a real worry.

They really look like a shadow of their former selves, struggling to qualify for the World Cup by just scraping through in the fourth qualifying spot in the South American qualifying group, while coach Felipe Scolari and his players have been criticised heavily in the media.

The Brazilian public just doesn't want to win the World Cup, they want to win it playing with the traditional style and flair that the whole world has come to expect from Brazil.

Winning ugly will not do thank you very much.

The Brazilian players and coach are feeling the immense expectations of the Brazilian public and having to live up to the legacy of past Brazilian teams.

The non-inclusion of Romario and the possible inclusion of Ronaldo are also causing immense debate in the Brazilian media.

Although Uruguay has some very good players, I feel they will struggle to make an impact.

Looking at Europe, England has made big strides under the coaching of Swede Sven-Goran Eriksson.

Brazil: always one of the favourites at World Cup time. But how will they go in Korea and Japan?

They came from a very difficult situation after the resignation of Kevin Keegan to qualify for the World Cup.

Eriksson has won over the doubters in the English game who were appalled at the thought of an England team being coached by a foreigner.

Germany has been disappointing and is on the wane as a World football power.

Like the Brazilians, the German national team is labouring under the expectations of past German teams who were led by such great leaders like Uwe Seeler, Franz Beckenbauer to the most recent legend Lothar Matthaus.

The Italian team will have to play a much more adventurous game, if it is to make an impact.

In fact I believe that Spain and Portugal will make a bigger impact than the Italians and the Germans.

Until next week,

Cheers Francis

Wenger praises Gunner ascendancy to No. 1

ARSENAL manager Arsene Wenger lavished praise on his players for ending Charlton's 12-match unbeaten run against London sides this season with a comprehensive 3-0 victory at the Valley on Monday.

The win in south London took Arsenal top of the English Premiership with 69 points from 32 games, one more than second-placed Liverpool and two more than Manchester United in third.

The Gunners remain hot favourites to land the championship as they crucially have a game in hand on both their title rivals.

Liverpool and Manchester United are involved in the quarter-finals of the Champions League this week and therefore were excused league duties.

All Arsenal's goals at the Valley were scored in the first-half. French international striker Thierry Henry netted twice before Swedish midfielder Freddy Ljungberg wrapped up the points.

Wenger saluted his team for a thoroughly professional performance against a normally stubborn Charlton side.

"I think an average Arsenal team would have had problems, but we were really focussed and looked dangerous going forward," Wenger said.

"We had pace and power and the players were on the same wavelength whenever we had the ball and the movement for the goals was superb.

"Then in the second-half we did a professional job when Charlton pushed more forward to make sure we kept a clean sheet."

The injury to defender Ashley Cole, who damaged the same medial ligaments in his left knee from which he has only recently recovered, however left Wenger fearing another major blow with Robert Pires and Giovanni van Bronckhorst already ruled out for the season.

At Pride Park, John Gregory's hopes of saving Derby from the drop suffered a major setback when Robbie Mustoe's 12th minute goal gave Middlesbrough a 1-0 win.

Derby manager Gregory admitted his team now have a mountain to climb after their third successive defeat.

He said: "We were unrecognisable from the side that played so well at Chelsea (on Saturday).

"To be honest I am lost for words. That's the worst we have played in the nine matches since I've been here."

Leicester stay rooted to the foot of the table with 22 points after going down 2-1 at Sunderland.

Sunderland had a dream start when

American international Claudio Reyna fired in a superb left-foot volley after just three minutes, but the lead didn't last long as Paul Dickov headed in an equaliser six minutes later.

However, Reyna added his second after 18 minutes to ease the pressure on manager Peter Reid and add to the gloom for Leicester.

Ipswich, third from bottom at the start of play, drew 0-0 with Chelsea but will regret missing a golden opportunity to grab the three when Marcus Bent missed a f penalty.

Everton, thrashed 6-2 at Ne on Friday, look to have guara safety with a 3-1 win over fel egation candidates Bolton at Goodison Park.

Both teams had a player se the first-half.

Everton striker Duncan Ferg was dismissed for violent con the 20th minute while Bolton Konstantinidis followed him 1 utes later for a second booka offence. At White Hart Lane, Tottenham beat Leeds 2-1. Norwegian international Steff Iversen gave Tottenham the before Teddy Sheringham pu the second after 29 minutes Leeds' hangover they had be fering after their 4-3 defeat Manchester United on Saturd

Leeds pulled one back throu Viduka after 52 minutes but Yorkshiremen's season contir disintegrate. Fulham's relega ries deepened when they we to West Ham United 1-0 at U Park. In the late game, Blacl eased its relegation fears wit home victory over Southamp first half goals from Damien Yordi.

AFP

RONALDO DREAMS OF AVENGING FRANCE '98

BRAZILIAN striker Ronaldo admits that every day he dreams of avenging his country's 1998 World Cup soccer defeat to France.

"Every day I dream of a new final against France. That 1998 defeat still sticks in my throat. And only a win against France, in a championship final, can end this trauma," Ronaldo told the daily O Globo.

The Inter Milan player suffered convulsions in his hotel hours before the final four years ago in Paris and was only a shadow of himself when he played in the game which France won 3-0.

Since then, Ronaldo's career has been hampered by a career-threatening right knee injury, and the former star striker is fighting to recover on time to compete in his third World Cup. He was world champion in 1994, aged 17 years.

"You can't erase everything that happened four years ago. But I know that people will only forget that defeat against France when I help Brazil to conquer the world title. And I believe that that will be possible in the next World Cup," said Ronaldo.

Ronaldo pointed out that in the 1994 World Cup he was a youngster whose team-mates were also his idols, and that it was a major change in the 1998 championship where he was a star in his own right.

"In 1998 my responsibility was much greater. But that did not affect me. It was painful to lose the title. Now it will be a new experience. I have a lot of confidence in Brazil whom I believe are stronger than in 1998. The pressure on me will not be as great," he said.

As to which player who will be the star of this summer's showcase of world football in Japan and South Korea, Ronaldo is keeping an open mind.

"It's hard to point out before a ball The World Cup is ment which brings the best."

But he predicted: be (Luis) Figo, Zidane, Rivaldo, Vieri and (Michae among others."

AFP

YOU THINK Anthony "The Man" Mundine has an ego? Well, there's a former successful Socceroo coach who makes Mundine look humble by comparison. This gent, who likes to be called "Sir", has recently been trying to wield his influence in certain circles but his arrogance and over-inflated ego has left a sour taste with several people. According to my spy, this gent's idea of humility is talking about himself and his past glories. "Oh, he's unbelievable," said the source after meeting the former coach for the first time. "In two hours he did nothing but talk about himself. I'm no dope, I've played sport at a high level and I've met high achievers, including astronauts, fighter pilots, leaders of industry and sporting greats. But nobody I've met has been as self-consumed as this guy. We met, I shouted him a meal, invited him into a corporate suite at an NSL game and not once did he say thank you. It was like he expected to be wined and dined at someone else's expense because of his reputation as a coach." But not only that, the gentleman in question then reportedly harrassed a female colleague of his host. "I introduced this guy to a colleague and she was horrified with his continuous advances. He's one of these smooth but sleazy types who likes to touch. His actions towards this woman were totally disrespectful of her and his hosts. Not long after that, I mentioned that I was going away for a few days due to a bereavement and you know what - he didn't give a shit, he just wanted to talk about his favourite subject: himself. " Since then the abovementioned coach has also tried to manipulate a certain young journalist. "This journo friend of mine was preparing to do an interview with another former Australia coach and this other Bozo found out about it. He had the nerve to say: "ask him who was the biggest influence on his career." And to reinforce his point, he rang the journo on the morning of the interview and reminded him: "ask him who was the biggest influence on his career." When the story ran and there was no mention of him in the text, he was furious, rang the journo and admonished him for not asking the question. Not just once, but three times. My journo buddy just told the Super Ego that the coach in question "didn't want to talk about the past". And he wonders why certain people won't have a bar of him and can't be bothered returning his calls." Hopefully the women at his new place of employment won't suffer the same humiliation as the abovementioned lady, who has vowed that she will indeed make him pay if their paths ever cross again.

****

LAST week I mentioned that Marshall Soper was still running around in the first division with the Western Rage. It appears as though the big forward still hasn't changed many of his training techniques. He was known, especially during his later years for having a real go at training, and it would take a brave player to get in the way during a 50-50 ball. My spies report that he has cleaned up quite a few of his teammates at training, and is making himself known to a few of the younger lads in the squad by giving them a verbal spray when he feels he is not given the proper respect, not to mention the ball to his feet. Still on the Rage and they have recently recruited former Joey and Marconi Stallion Darren Iocca, which certainly gives them an imposing front-line.

****

WITH so many overseas clubs looking to buy an interest in our Aussie product, it comes as no surprise to see the Marconi Stallions, being linked with an Italian club. The move will of course see the club buy a controlling interest, and a junior academy setup in alliance with the club, something similar to what Glasgow Rangers has with the Northern Spirit. At this stage the name of the Italian club can't be revealed, but there was a loud whisper that Marconi had already rejected a move by English Premier League club Newcastle who were looking to inject $3 million to establish a relationship. If this Italian club can offer similar sorts of money, then it might not be too long before we see the Stallions back at the top of the NSL.

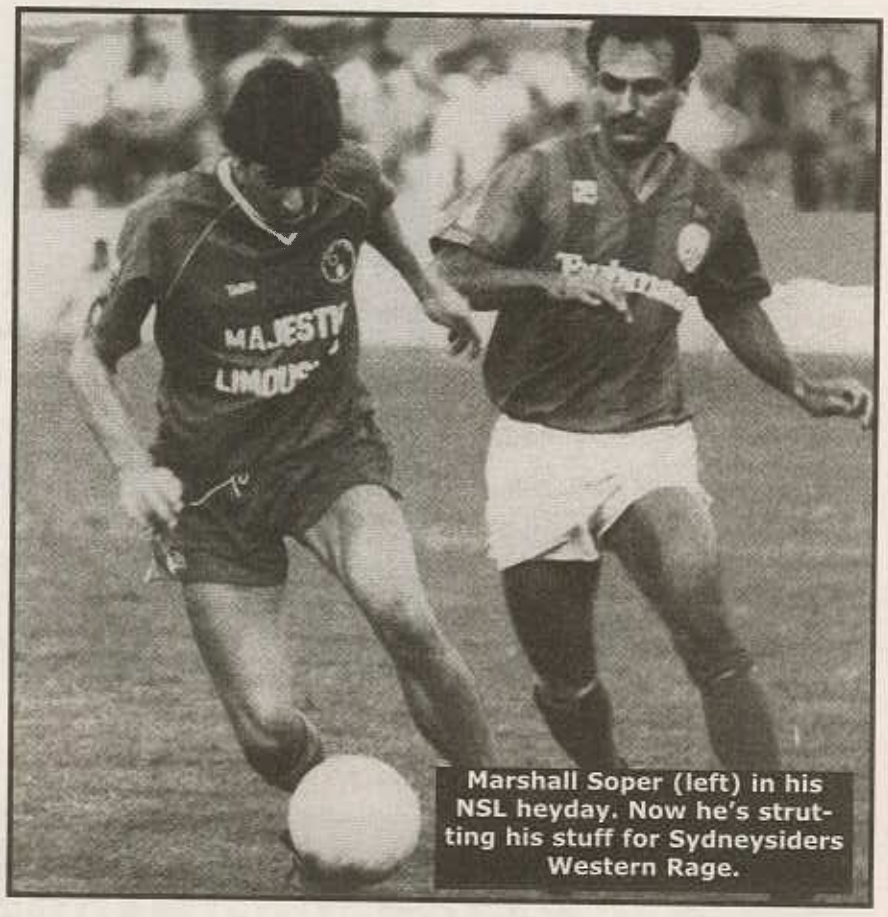
****

THERE is talk that Parramatta Power Assistant Coach Stuart Munro has been linked with a move to the Blacktown City Demons next season. Whether this means that he will take over from established first grade and former NSW coach Brian Brown is still unknown. But it's highly unlikely that Munro will take on the role of assistant. If Munro is given the first-grade job then that will also leave a highly-ranked Blacktown official seething as he has been known to be chasing after that job for a number of year s now. One has to feel for current coach Brian Brown who has turned around the Demons after a disappointing start. It will certainly be interesting to see if the situation changes should Blacktown take out another title.

****

There is strong talk that Sutherland won't be permitted to enter next season's NSW Premier League competition. And don't think that it has anything to do with their on-field performances. Word is that the Shire owe the NSW Soccer Federation money, and unless that money is repaid then the Sharks should best start preparing for next season's winter competition. Personally it would be a shame if this did occur, because they looked to have finally be on the right track, with long-term goals in place. The signing of John Turner has certainly lifted their profile, and their appears to be an air of promise down south.

It could come to a shattering halt if the federation gets their way, and if they're not in the Summer competition than the chances of John Turner staying are less than zero.



Marshall Soper (left) in his NSL heyday. Now he's strutting his stuff for Sydneysiders Western Rage.

Support staff makes modern game more professional

IN Australia there has been too much emphasis on the physical side of soccer in the last 10 years, with players continually being hammered at training session after training session.

One particular coach I know has a reputation of doing nothing but this kind of grueling routine with his players and had them doing it four or five times a week.

However this hard-nosed mentality has started to change in recent times, slowly but surely.

Some of the good coaches I have worked under have started to understand the physical side of training is simply a means towards achieving a total soccer package.

Other important changes in the last 10 years include the support staff of any team, these being assistant coaches, conditioning coaches and medical staff.

These support staff are specifically trained to deal with certain needs and more in tune with various areas such as players diet, with nutrition and supplement advice, fitness testing and rehabilitation from injury.

The game has become a lot more professional in terms of this change in attitude and that is reflected by the huge amounts of money that players are earning both locally and specifically overseas.

I am a believer that up to the age of 15, strength and physical training should be secondary to a players development.

The emphasis must be on ball skills because the bottom line is that if you don't have the technical ability, you will never make it to the top despite your athleticism.

At the age of 15 players should start developing specialised physical fitness into their training routines.

They train in two separate ways, by doing general soccer related conditioning and soccer specific conditioning.

General soccer conditioning includes training that does not involve playing soccer but mimes soccer situations as closely as possible. These could include such exercises as various spr running and some plyor exercises.

Specific soccer conditi involves simulating the much as possible. This include games in small as 5 versus 5 or posses

It's important that bot conditioning techniques porated into a full cond gram to give a total de

In coming weeks I wil more detail with some

The third and crucial p area that I personally d being managed as well be, is the mental appro game.

At the end of the day could be on par with ea when it comes to skill a but the thing that will s them is their own belie dence.

A player that believes selves, in their training goals, visualised them greater commitment to succeed.

The same applies to l processes become part habit, and impact their and approach.

To be a complete play requires the right comb all three areas and it's many of today's moder applying these very tec

Nick Bilbija is the fitne at NSW Premier Leagu ons Bonnyrigg White Ea has achieved the follow stones:

**Three-time Grand Fi fitness coach*

**NSW representative tioner 2000-2002*

**NSL and NSW Refere coach*

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DEFENDING AT SET PLAYS

By Jimmy Fraser
former Australia World Cup goalkeeper

THE number of goals scored from set plays at every level of competition shows just how vulnerable teams are in these situations! While teams constantly practice both defending and attacking from set pieces, defences often panic when placed under pressure resulting in a goal.

It is imperative at these set plays that the keeper calls the play and positions the players according to the position of the ball and the tactics devised and practiced to defend the set play in progress.

To do this successfully the keeper must have the leadership qualities and organisational ability to read the build up and place the players in the best possible positions. All players must be schooled on exactly what their job is prior to and immediately after the kick is taken. The defenders should take up their positions and not get caught ball watching or be distracted by any activities either on or off the field that will distract them from completing their set tasks.

Many players lose focus during the build up to the kick as players from both teams jostle for or change position. It is in this period that many chances are created by attacking players by creating doubts in the minds of the defenders.

The keeper must show authority and control the defense while concentrating on the position of the ball and the imminent striker. It is not unusual for keeper's to have two or three jobs to do at one time and this is just one of many times throughout the match where the keeper must show his tactical ability and organise the defense while also carrying out their duty to defend the goal.

The ability to complete more than one task at a time comes with experience both in training and on the park in matches.

While it may seem an insurmountable task early in the players career, once the keeper becomes familiar with their role and understands the requirements to complete the task and the tactics of defending and then handling the tasks becomes second nature.

The keeper's focus must always be on the ball and the attacking player who is most likely to strike the ball while also being aware of and positioning the defenders to negate any variations of play which involve passing to another player moving into a position to get a better shooting or crossing position.

Good positioning will reduce the available options of the attacking team! Good strong communication from the keeper will reduce both the confusion and stress that is usually present in the defending team during set plays.

A well coached team where all players are familiar with their tasks and are focused will be be more successful at defending set plays and of course reduce the number of goals scored against and chances created. Practice sessions prior to the match should also indicate any positional or role changes caused by substitutions or injuries to the starting eleven. A substitute who does not know their job is an immediate liability and the keeper must be aware of how to delegate the role and set

tle the new player in with a minimum of disruption to the team.

Once the ball is in motion the keeper's role will again influence the play. The golden rule is safety first, always! If possession is gained the keeper should ensure through good directions that the ball is either cleared up field, passed to a player in a better position or played dead allowing the defence to reorganise. The keeper should scan the field and direct players off the ball which will provide options to provide a quick attacking build up. The keeper who can direct the play and turn defence into attack by pushing players into position by good communication should understand the tactics of playing out from behind. The positioning of the defence at penalty kicks should also be practiced with players given set tasks and being coached to react when the kick is taken. I could not count the number of goals I have seen scored after a keeper has made a great save where the ball has rebounded back into play and the defending team are caught flat footed while the attacking team reacts to the loose ball and scores. Corners and crosses also require constant practice with the keeper organizing the defense and providing good attacking options by quick and clever distribution. In all set plays the practiced theme should focus on good organization, tight marking and each player being focused on their set job. The keeper has a focal job in all these situations and their contribution will have a decided impact on the game if their skills in organizing and communicating to the defense are practiced on a regular basis.

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On the NSL Beat

with Lewis JONES

News, views and snippets from around the National Leag

KINGZ

THE EXODUS from the Kingz FC will not include assistant coach Shane Rufer who denied claims that he had walked out on the club after an alleged row with veteran John Markovski. The Sunday Star Times reported that Rufer - who has been involved with the National Soccer League side since its inception - had quit the club after a training bust-up. "I'm not running anywhere," Rufer told NZPA. "Tomorrow is another day, we'll sort it all out." Rufer added that he was advised not to comment on the story but replied "of course" when asked if he would be reporting for work with the Kingz - which is assured of the wooden spoon. Kingz general manager Chris Turner echoed Rufer's comments. "Yes he is (going to be at training)," Turner said. "I have spoken to Shane Rufer today, and he's obviously pretty upset about the article. "He will be at work on Monday morning."

Turner said he had no further comment to make on the matter but did say that this season had been horrendous for the Auckland-based club. "There's no two ways about it, our results have been abysmal. It's been a dire season, but we're well down the track on getting things set for next season." After Sky Sports elected to cut back its share in the Kingz, Turner and fellow director Ted Midlane look set to take over ownership of the club.

The Kingz' misery continued last Friday when they suffered a 2-1 dusting to Adelaide City in Auckland.

The loss almost certainly ensured the Kingz - touted by some as a top three hope at the start of the NSL season - will finish at the bottom of the heap.

MELBOURNE KNIGHTS

Knights captain-coach Andrew Marth left the battlefield against Northern Spirit with a suspected broken nose, but will miss his side's final fixture next weekend against Parramatta Power anyway. Marth collected a yellow card which earned him an automatic one-week suspension for exceeding the disciplinary points limit. In allowing Spirit to steal a 2-2 draw last weekend, the Knights also blew the opportunity to finish in third place on the final standings.

NEWCASTLE

A CONTROVERSIAL 90th minute penalty goal secured Newcastle second place in the NSL after the visitors struggled to a one-all draw against Sydney United at Edensor Park. The plucky Bravehearts looked set for the most unlikely of wins until referee Matthew Breeze awarded a penalty on the spot just seconds from time. Newcastle's dead ball specialist Alex Moreira tumbled in what appeared to be an innocuous challenge by United replacement Brendan Santalab. Moreira made no mistake with the penalty shot, with the valuable one point expected to give Newcastle two chances when the NSL finals start in two weeks time. After the match, Newcastle coach Ian Crook at least got things half right. "It wasn't a penalty but we didn't deserve to lose," Crook said. Newcastle may have claimed the points but it was another worrying sign for the Novocastrians who have had a bad recent run of form with just one game of the regular season remaining. Striker Joel Griffiths missed a penalty in the 79th minute with gangling Sydney United goalkeeper Vilson Knezevic the hero as he parried the ball away. But his heroics amounted to little as Moreira made no mistake with the second penalty attempt just seconds before the final whistle.

South Melbourne sharpshooter Vaughan Coveny: grabbed a hat-trick against Wollongong

NORTHERN SPIRIT

SCOTTISH supersub Stephen Dobbie resurrected Northern Spirit's slender playoff hopes, snatching both goals in his side's 2-2 draw with the Melbourne Knights at Knights Stadium. With a loss certain to end the Spirit's season, they fell behind 2-0 as the Knights took the blowtorch to their defence with a freewheeling display in the first 60 minutes. Enter Dobbie - an under-19 player on loan from Spirit's Scottish benefactors Glasgow Rangers - who came up with a couple of Easter miracles with his side seemingly destined for defeat. Lax Knights defence allowed Dobbie to stroll through for a soft 67th minute goal just seven minutes after he entered the game. But there was no stopping Dobbie's second - a stunner from 35 metres which keeps the Spirit in with of making the top six. coach Mick Hickman paid 19-year-old Scot, who Australia three weeks a Glasgow Rangers' deve gram. "He's adjusting m he's got good touch and ously score goals," Hick scored four for our yo week. Obviously we're his performance tonigh must now beat Wollon weekend's final fixture hope for other results t to make the playoffs.

PERTH GLORY

THEY may have recor victory over Olympic 2000, but Perth Glory know why coach Mich D' game's best striker, Da the bench for so long. on Saturday to set up second-placed Newcast the right to host the NS Olympic stayed third a marred by a blaze of yell visitor's had the best of ing chances and in the s Ante Milicic put a diving Glory keeper Jason P Sharks picked up four yellow cards handed o Mark Shiel - but the mos against Glory's Jarni Harnwell put in a crude the 20th minute to stop forward with a four on tage and Shiel whipped tion. Harnwell now has cards this season, one automatic one-game su one round remaining bef Glory levelled in the 3 corner from Brad Malon by Alistair Edwards befo deflected it into the net der. On the stroke of hal Brad Hassell beat two rifle a shot from 20 met Bolton in the Olympic go

SOUTH MELBOURNE

A HAT-TRICK by Kiwi Vaughan Coveny last South Melbourne into the outclassing defending Wollongong 4-1 at W Coveny tormented his with three fine goals, 52nd, and 79th minutes leapfrogged the La Parramatta into sixth s Power having the bye i mate round.

On the NSL Beat

with Lewis JONES

News, views and snippets from around the National League

Con Boutsianis gave the Lakers the perfect start with a spectacular 25 metre strike from a free kick in just the fourth minute.

Boutsianis won the free kick when fouled by Dino Mennillo and made the Wolves pay, sending a curling shot over the wall and into the top corner.

But Wolves' Con Anthopoulos equalised in the 33rd minute, completely against the run of play. It was the Wolves' first significant attack, with Stuart Young holding off a defender and firing in a low cross met by Anthopoulos at the far post. But just six minutes later Coveny put the Lakers back in front with an excellent strike from just inside the penalty box.

The former Wollongong striker's fierce left foot drive gave Wollongong keeper Dean Anastasiadis no chance.

Coveny ensured the Lakers would be in the top six with one round remaining with his second goal in the 52nd minute. The lanky striker was a constant menace to an overworked Wollongong defence and shrugged off a challenge from George Souris to score from 12 metres.

Coveny completed his hat trick in the 79th minute again using his pace and strength to beat his defender and give Anastasiadis no chance with a clinical strike.

While South Melbourne have resurrected their season since Christmas it still may face a legal fight to retain the three points earned in the mid season win over the Football Kingz. The Kingz claim Boutsianis, who quit the club to return to the Lakers, was ineligible to play against them, while South claimed that there was no contractual arrangement.

SYDNEY UNITED

FOR THE umpteenth time this season, United's 1-1 home draw with Newcastle was another case of doing everything but taking away full points in a match they deserved to win. Honours were shared in the first half with easy goals missed by both sides but the Bravehearts stepped up the pace in the second stanza. After appearing to lack the class to finish off their territorial dominance, things changed in the 74th minute when midfielder Gabriel Mendez unleashed a superb inside ball. The controversial one-time Socceroo, who was fined for spitting on former coach Mick Hickman during a game two weeks ago, found Ante Deur, whose cross was dispatched neatly off the head of Commins Menapi. The final 15 minutes featured drama aplenty with Menapi failing to clinch the game when he was in space a minute later and then United blew a host of opportunities.

WOLVES

AFTER watching his side collapse to a 3-1 defeat to South Melbourne last Friday Wollongong coach Ron Corry conceded that the Melburnians were the better side. "They played us off the park," Corry said. "It was a very disappointing performance from us."

Indeed, the reigning champions looked listless and disinterested and with just one round remaining have six wins and 10 losses on the ledger.

PARRAMATTA POWER

ALL eyes will be on the three games this weekend as four teams battle it out for the final position on the NSL ladder.

Five spots have already been sealed but there is still a good chance Parramatta Power, South Melbourne, Northern Spirit and the Marconi Stallions can snatch sixth position.

The Power - who had a bye - dropped to seventh position after the weekend matches, while South Melbourne reclaimed sixth spot when it defeated the Wollongong Wolves 4-1 on Thursday night.

There is still hope for the Power to make the six but it will depend on Friday night's result between South Melbourne and the Marconi Stallions.

Marconi, who defeated the Brisbane Strikers 3-2 at Marconi Stadium, must beat South Melbourne 4-0 to stay in the hunt for the final spot. Marconi's win against the Strikers saw the Fairfield based team climb to within three points of South Melbourne.

The other team hoping to snatch sixth position will be Northern Spirit who faces a disoriented Wollongong Wolves outfit. Spirit snatched a draw against the Melbourne Knights at the weekend to keep its finals hope alive.

Both the Power and Spirit will be watching closely on Friday night to find out their fate.

Despite the weekend results the Power boys will be hoping to finish the season with a win to farewell the coaching staff.

If the Power fails to make the six it will mean head coach, David Mitchell, and assistant coaches, Lawrie McKinna and Stuart Munro, will take part in their final game for Parramatta Power.

Mitchell and McKinna were appointed to lead the Power in its inaugural year while Stuart Munro joined the coaching department at the start of this season.

The Power will play its most crucial game on Sunday afternoon when it faces the fifth-placed Melbourne Knights at Parramatta Stadium.

Joel Porter will be a dangerman when this week the Knights face Parramatta Power.

The game, which kicks off at 3pm, will be the last home game for the 2001/02 season for the blue and gold and also for the coaching staff.

Parramatta last played the Knights in round 13 when the Power won 1-0 at Knights Stadium to cement its place in the top six. It could become a case of de ja vu for the blue and gold if the weekend results do go its way. It will mean the Power must win to cement its place in the final.

The dangerman to look out for is young striker Joel Porter who is emerging as one of the NSL's most sought-after players. Porter has scored 11 goals for the Knights this season and will be keen to improve his tally.

Meanwhile, the Power youth team has maintained its position on top of the National Youth League ladder after defeating the Brisbane Toro 5-1 in Brisbane on Monday night.

Adam Kwasnik and Peter Gavaghan both scored a double while Steve Fitzsimmons score the final goal.

Only one point separates the Power and the Wollongong Wolves. Both teams will be trying desperately to take out the minor premiership this weekend. The Power this Sunday plays the Marconi Stallions Colts at Parramatta Stadium.

Power News by Taghred Chandab

SOCCER TODAY available every Thursday at newsagencies

White Hot Con Boutsiani shooting for semis

CONTROVERSIAL South Melbourne striker Con Boutsianis has had quite a season. His off-f battle with the Football Kingz is well documented but with the Final Six series due to kickof week, Soccer Australia's decision not to penalise the wayward goal-scorer could come back haunt the man and his beloved club. SOCCER TODAY's Melbourne correspondent MELINA BOURSINOS caught up with Boutsianis ...

WELCOME to Bob Jane Stadium.

The game is heading for a 1-1 draw with the final whistle only minutes away. South Melbourne is hovering in the bottom half of the table, desperately needing a win.

Before long the ball is crossed into the penalty area and it lands at the feet of a South player.

Within seconds he shoots and scores a goal.

The crowd suddenly erupts - Con Boutsianis is back!

The 30 year old has returned with a bang.

"It's good," Boutsianis said.

"I wasn't away for long and I didn't really play for Auckland, so it's really similar to when I was here. "The club were in a bad position and they needed someone.

"I also wanted to play, so we came to an agreement."

"Boutsi' as he is known around the traps, is ecstatic about being back at the club where he began his professional career.

However, he is aware that the Blue and White army expect success and explains that the fans passion and support is one of the main differences between the 'Lakers' and his previous clubs.

"Perth is a big club financially, but South Melbourne have a good set up," Boutsianis said.

"The fans have been good.

"As long as I do my job, I know they'll be happy."

There was a time, when the midfielder's future looked uncertain.

However despite his doubts, he continued to train on his own, with the belief that he would once again be given the chance to play the game he loved.

And that is exactly what has happened.

"It was hard," he said. "I new that I would play again, I just didn't know where and when. Soccer Australia would say the tribunal was one day and then they would change it.

"I would do gym work, running and weights.

"It was thanks to my personal trainer that I was so fit.

"In my first game against Perth I played for 70 minutes.

"If I hadn't trained for six months then there is no way I would have been able to play."

The abovementioned night is proof that he has defied all odds, and in the process reached the magic milestone of 250 NSL appearances.

I asked Boutsianis how it felt to reach such a milestone and he replied that given his first priority is to play well and to lift the team into the Top Six, playing 250 games hadn't even crossed his mind.

"To be fair, I thought that I had played 300 games," he said.

"I had no idea until I was told.

"When you get older you're just happy to be playing.

"It's good, but I'm not going to really think about it when I'm on the field."

South Melbourne has only lost one game since Boutsianis rejoined the team and word around the terraces is that his brilliance on the field is the reason for this superb run.

His technical ability and understanding of the game has shone through in ry match and it seems that the missing piece to the puzzle has finally been found.

"In every game, I try my best and try to assist the team and I'm happy with my performance," he said.

Boutsianis has scored five goals since his return and things are looking good.

According to the number 25, with the leadership of coach Eddie Krncevic and the determination of the team, it is possible for South Melbourne reach the finals.

He explains that one of the key strengths of the team is its defence which have been solid throughout the season.

He also sees the inclusion of the youth players as a positive move for the future, but he thinks it will take time for them to develop.

"Eddie's been good," Boutsianis said.

"He helped me when I wanted to sign.

"The young boys are good players, but they've got a long way to go. They still have a lot to learn.

"When you have three to four kids it's not easy to win a game.

"They just have to be patie

"We have a great chance o the Top Six.

"We've achieved a hell of a ing from where we've come.

"Anything from then on is a

"Football is weird ... anythi sible."

Off the field controversy co plague the 30 year old.

His former club the Auckla Football Kingz, are involved pute with Soccer Australia.

They are asking the gover to decide whether he was play in the match betwee teams earlier this season.

Boutsianis was released New Zealand club on the pr he did not play in the game. South Melbourne played the er, claiming that the agree void as its details had been to the media. According Australia's Acting Chief Officer, the legal committee it's final ruling on the issue.

"The matter requires through the legal process through Soccer Australia's system."

But two clubs are preparir action against South if the premiers reach the play-off expense. Northern Sp Parramatta Power, currentl fringes of the Top Six, will lo suing legal action against miss out and South get thro

But apart from that the q South supporters' lips is Boutsianis remain loyal to t and fans alike who have him through the difficult tim

And will he end his career that made him a star and o the opportunity to once ag his boots and do what he d

"I really don't know, Boutsianis' direct reply.

"The club's not financially ble, so I'm not sure what w

"But if everything goes w happy to stay."

TEAM LINEUPS

NORTHERN SPIRIT

Coach: Mick Hickman

1 L Acevski
2 J Watts
3 S Bell
4 N Spencer
5 R Trajkovski
6 S Thomas
7 A McDermott
8 C Foster
9 A Cervinski
10 P Cardozo
11 T Cranney
12 J Hutchinson
14 M Cartwright
15 J Seale
16 S Catanzaro
18 R Enes
19 R Griffiths

WOLLONGONG WOLVES

Coach: Ron Corry

1 D Anastasiadis
2 G Souris
3 A Ceccoli
4 R Stanton
6 A Castro
10 S Young
11 N Sekulovski
13 C Anthopoulos
15 D Huxley
16 B Sullivan
19 T Perinich
23 D Mennillo
24 D Wells
25 G Sharland
30 S Whalan

IN THE SPIRIT

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DID YOU KNOW? - Northern Spirit

1. Which club did Stephen Dobbie join Northern Spirit from?
2. What season did Northern Spirit make the NSL semi finals?
3. Which Spirit player was in the Wollongong side that won the 1999/2000 grand final?
4. Who wears the Number 6 for Northern Spirit?
5. Which Griffiths brother is older, Ryan or Adam?

DID YOU KNOW? - Wollongong Wolves

1. Which player was released by Spirit and picked up by Wollongong this season?
2. What stadium does Wollongong play out of?
3. Adrian Cervinski's brother's plays for Wollongong, what is his name?
4. Who has played the most games for the Wolves?
5. Who wears number 7 for Wollongong?

DID YOU KNOW? - Australian Soccer

1. Which Aussie scored against Manchester United last weekend?
2. What club does Marco Bresciano play for?
3. Who is the only Aussie playing in the Spanish Premira Liga?
4. When was the last time a Newcastle team made the NSL semi finals?
5. Who was the Minor Premiers in the 1989 NSL?

Answers:

Northern Spirit - 1. Rangers, 2. 1998/99, 3. Noel Spencer, 4. Scott Thomas, 5. Adam Griffiths.

Wollongong - 1. Tony Petrich, 2. WIN Stadium, 3. David Cervinski, 4. Matthew Horsley, 5. Paul Reid.

Australian Soccer - 1. Mark Viduka, 2. Empoli, 3. John Aloisi, 4. Never, 5. Marconi.

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SUTHERLAND PLEASED WITH SEASON SO FAR

By Adam LETO

RENOWNED for their development of youth, the Sutherland Premier Youth League sides have responded accordingly to the start of the competition this season.

Newly appointed Senior Vice President and current first-grade coach Billy McColl has been working with the juniors and is relatively pleased with what they've shown so far.

"We've started off reasonably well and have picked up points in every round, so that's been pleasing," McColl told *Soccer Today*.

The 17s are looking very good at this early stage, and have three wins out of the four matches.

McColl attributes the competitiveness of the side to the fact that they've been working closely with the under 19s.

"The 17s would have to be our strongest side, and that's largely due to the fact that they've been doing a lot of work with the 19s," McColl says.

"Our 14s would have to be our next best-performed side, and they've been playing exceptionally well.

"They've created a number of opportunities in their matches but have just conceded some silly goals.

"The 15s are doing reasonably well, the only problem with them has been that they're drawing matches that they should be winning.

"Scoring goals has been their main problem."

The 13s have probably performed above expectation, and currently sit mid-table in their competition with six points.

"They're a new side, and are performing better then expected at this stage," McColl explains.

"They've been a bonus and the more points we get from them this season the better."

McColl along with Richard May, who only recently stood down from the Presidency of the club, but is still an active board member, have gone about devising a long-term plan to ensure success at Sutherland - and a lot of that is based on the juniors.

"We're starting a system that is aimed at increasing the competitiveness and structure of all levels of football from the grassroots to first grade," McColl says.

"We want to become a successful, winning soccer club, and whereas in the past the youth league kids have struggled, we're turning that around from the bottom up.

"We basically want to instill a winning mentality all the way through the club."

The results so far at a youth league level at least, have been promising, with the coaching staff at Sutherland becoming much more specific in their approach.

"On Sunday's we've started a special training group for the 11s, 12s and 13s that will focus on specific areas that we feel certain players need to work on," McColl says.

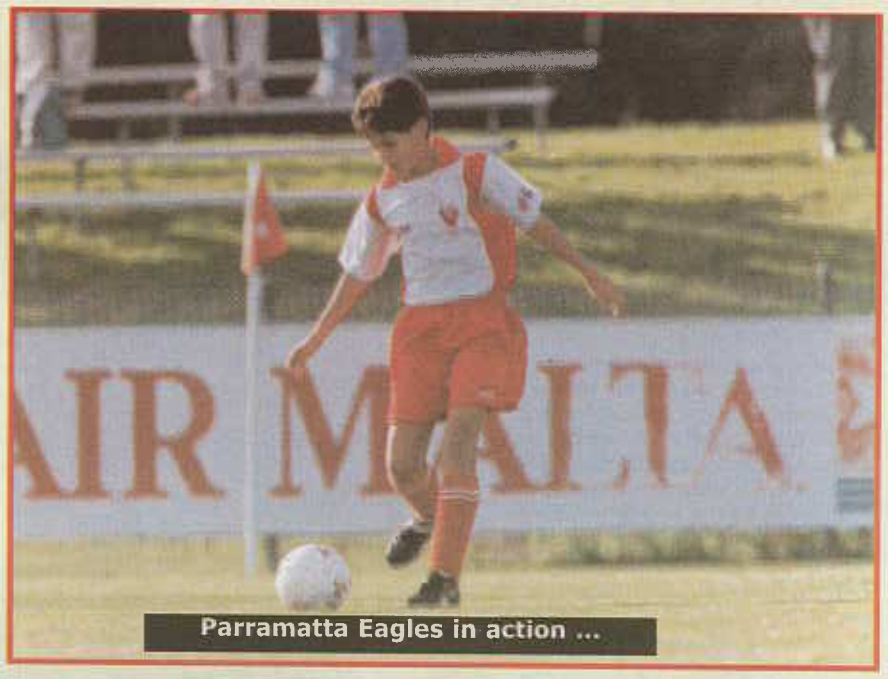
"For instance one player might need to work on their ball skills, another positioning.

"And starting on Friday, once the first grade season has finished we'll be having striker training, where we teach them the fine art of being able to put the ball in the back of the net."

Sutherland's real test comes when they play the top sides in the league and McColl is under no illusions of what to expect.

"We haven't played the big boys, like Spirit or Blacktown yet," he says.

"That will be a real test for us, but I think we will do O.K."



Parramatta Eagles in action ...

NSW PREMIER YOUTH LEAGUE
RESULTS ROUND 4

UNDER 13

Penrith 0	Parramatta Eagles 1
Olympic Sharks 0	St George 2
Leichhardt Tigers 4	Central Coast 3
Northern Spirit 4	Sydney United 0
Sutherland 1	Southern Branch 0

UNDER 14

Penrith 1	Parramatta Eagles 1
Olympic Sharks 5	St George 1
Leichhardt Tigers 0	Central Coast 2
Northern Spirit 5	Sydney United 2
Sutherland 3	Southern Branch 1

UNDER 15

Penrith 0	Parramatta Eagles 4
Olympic Sharks 4	St George 0
Leichhardt Tigers 0	Central Coast 3
Northern Spirit 1	Sydney United 1
Sutherland 0	Southern Branch 0

UNDER 17

Penrith 1	Parramatta Eagles 2
Olympic Sharks 5	St George 0
Leichhardt Tigers 5	Central Coast 0
Northern Spirit 2	Sydney United 1
Sutherland 4	Southern Branch 3

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The amazing Henderson family

Former international goalkeeper Bill Henderson represented Australia with pride in 21 matches between 1953 and 1956. His father Andy also wore national colours, while his brother Andy (junior) represented New South Wales. Derek Royal met Bill, now in his 70s, at his Sydney home and discovered that he still has a passion for the round-ball game. **Soccer Today** reproduced the following articles that in 1955 appeared in SPORTING LIFE and KING SOCCER.

FOOTBALL IN THEIR BLOOD
By Geoff Allen
SPORTING LIFE, July 1955

The Henderson Brothers weren't given silver spoons as babes; they cut their first teeth on miniature Soccer balls.

There may be something in prenatal influence when it comes to football.

Take the case of the Henderson family, of Granville, one of Sydney's growing hotbeds of Soccer.

Andy Henderson left his native Glasgow, Scotland, where football was a tradition with his kith and kin and arrived in a "barbarous" country in 1921, where Soccer was the poor relation of all the codes.

Luckily for his peace of mine and future happiness his destiny took him to Kurri Kurri, on the northern NSW coalfields, where fellow outcasts formed a strong core of support for the round ball game!

After playing for Kurri Kurri, he moved to Sydney, taking care to seek a habitat that was Soccer-minded. It was while playing for the Granville club that he represented Australia against visiting teams from China and Canada.

With a Scotsman's care for such details, Andy took a wife, Margaret, who was as crazy about Soccer as himself. Also from a footballing family, she had two brothers who were star players.

It was no wonder, then, that when the Henderson's first born was a son the child's main interest in life was predetermined to be centred on a spherical object of inflated rubber and leather covering.

In fact, Andy junior was given no dummy to bite on when his swollen gums betrayed that his first teeth were eager to erupt. His doting and scheming parents gave him a miniature Soccer ball - about as big as a tennis ball - to tide him over the difficulty.

Thus, already carrying a goodly share of Soccer blood in his veins, and with his system permeated with a leathery tang acquired orally by suction, it was natural that, at the walking stage, young Andy's chief occupation was kicking a slightly larger football around the house and backyard.

He was three when brother Bill was born, and Andy joined his parents in the now traditional forms of initiation.

As had Andy, Bill thrived on the treatment and at two was ready for the first family team game - Bill and Dad v. Mum and Andy in the long passageway of the house with the open doorways at either end as the mouth of the goals.

Even at that age Bill showed a propensity for keeping goal, and his enthusiastic father encouraged him to block and save, catch and kick, little realising that one day the auburn-haired youngster would be Australia's No. 1 goalkeeper.

As the boys grew, so did their Soccer horizon expand.

They accompanied their father regularly to a nearby paddock where he coached several prominent players including his wife's brother, Bill Adamson, Mat. McGillvray, Bobby Campbell, Paddy Darke and Jim Creely.

At Granville public school the boys graduated through class teams into the senior school team, Bill at 10 representing Granville district schools against Newcastle.

While Andy played with a strong junior team, Kewpies, on Saturday, Bill, at 11, organised his own team, the Waratahs.

He went from door to door canvassing for funds, and collected 12 pounds in six hours.

With the money he bought materials from which his mother made shirts and shorts for his team's outfit, and he persuaded his grandmother to knit 11 pairs of socks in a week,

Bill had soon to leave his own very junior team behind to push on with his ambition.

He followed his brother into the Kewpies, but because they were so strong, he had nothing to do but lounge around in goal.

At 16, he played two first-grade games with Granville seniors, then left it at that as another game would have debarred him from further junior football.

It was not surprising then that he was chosen to captain the district's under-18 junior team, as his brother Andy had before him.

Andy, meantime, had at 20 become a permanent member of the Granville first-grade side as right half, but so far has failed to gain representative honours, although last year he played for The Rest against NSW.

Andy Hnenderson, senior, had won some fame by pioneering the third back game in Australia when coaching the Australian team against the Yugoslavs and again when the South African team was here.

The boys were mighty proud of their father, but their faith in him was somewhat shaken when he decided four years ago to give a helping hand to rival club, Auburn, who were without a coach.

The sons argued that this smattered of treachery, but the elder Henderson pointed out that by coaching Auburn he was furthering the interests of the game.

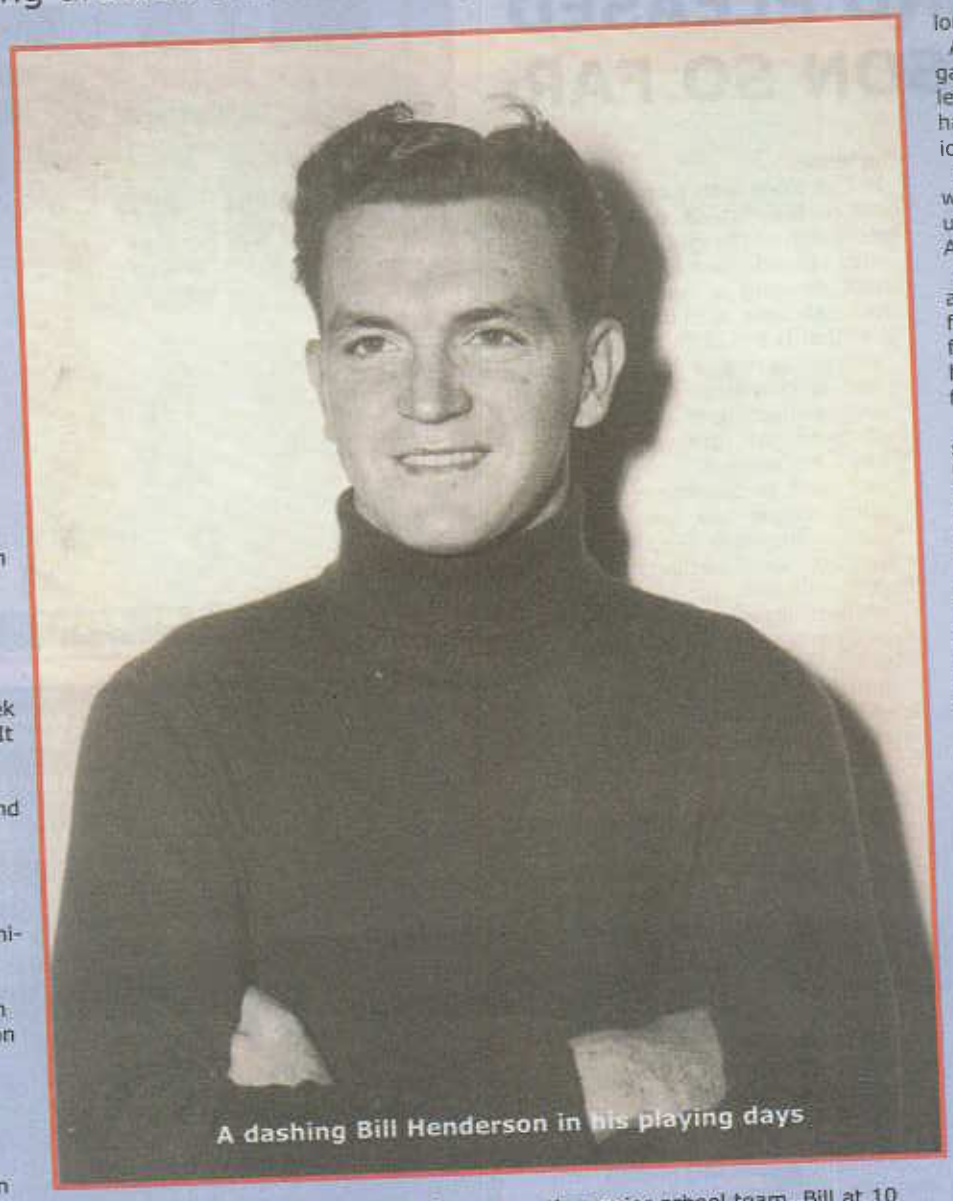
He did not relish the clashes between Granville and Auburn, and was relieved when he was engaged this season to act as a judge for the Sun-Herald "best players of the day" competition.

He has an arrangement not to sit in on any Granville match, so that he cannot be accused of favouring his sons, but Mrs. Henderson attends all the Granville matches and faithfully relays the run of play with a commentry on the form of the boys.

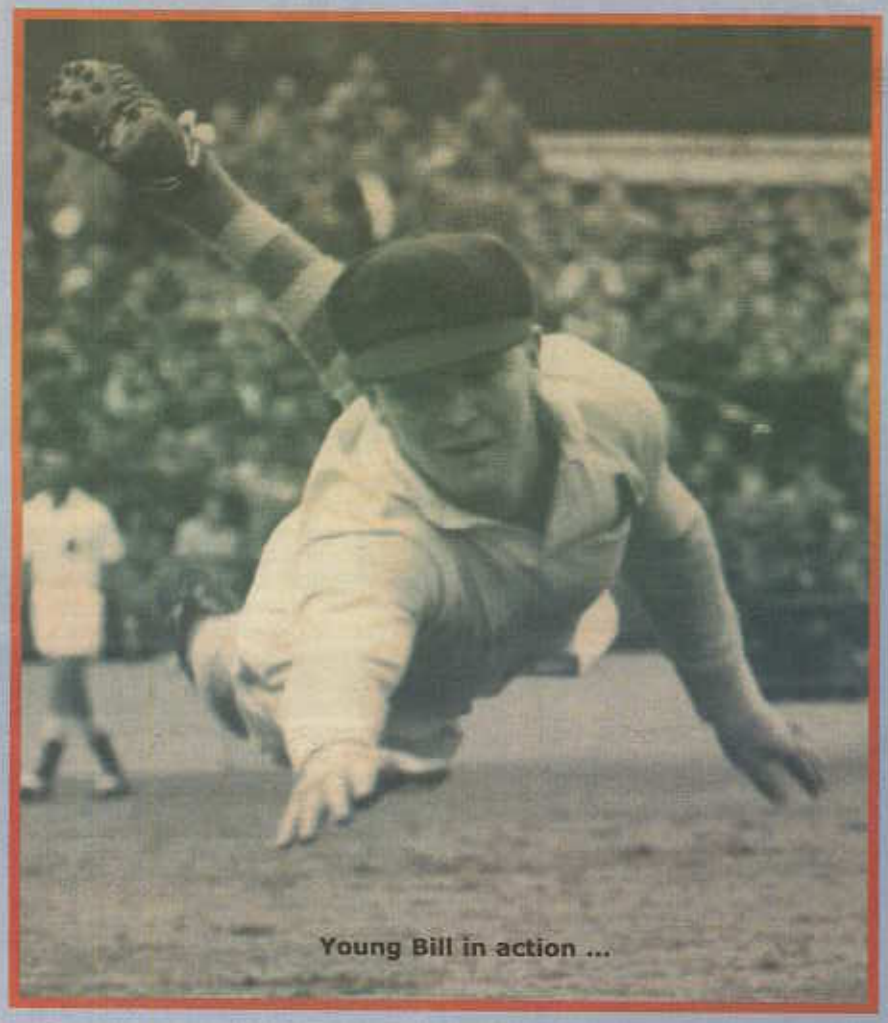
In that way, Henderson, senior, can help solve any problems the sons may have experienced in the game, and he knows their play so well that he can visualise what has happened.

Bill can thank his father for encouraging him to exploit the third back play. He often ventures from the goal-mouth so far as to become virtually the third back, patrolling practically the whole of the penalty area.

By leaving the goal mouth, Bill says he narrows the angle for an opponent to take a shot. Such tactics would be regarded as risky, but for young Henderson's keen anticipation and fine judgement. Those attributes, together with excellent ball control earned him a place in the Australian team in the fourth and fifth Tests against China two years ago when he was 22.



A dashing Bill Henderson in his playing days



Young Bill in action ...

Bill also has a powerful clearance and some of his kicks land on the full 90 yards away.

In the third Test against New Zealand one of his kicks from goal landed in the opposing penalty area and crossed the goal line without a player having touched the ball.

Today, many soccer fans look to the 6ft 12st Australian goalie to provide the thrills of the game. His spectacular goal-saving dives, daring sorties into the penalty area and prodigious kicks seem certain to ensure his place in the Australian team against visiting sides this season.

Henderson, too, is invaluable in the tactical councils of his team. His keen knowledge of the game enables him from his leisurely position to pick out the mistakes of individual players, both in the opposing side and in his own.

He spills his observations to his team-mates at half-time, enabling them to rectify their own weaknesses and exploit those of the other team.

Bill Henderson is not invaluable to the Australian team for his football alone.

Should it ever happen that musical accomplishments count he will hold his place without question.

He is a one-man band, playing eight musical instruments, a singer of pop tunes, a serious player of B flat flute, and a mimic.

Moreover, he has proved himself popular with referees since entertaining them at their annual dinner last year.

They refused to send him off until he has scored with several encores, despite the fact that, as he said, for the first time he had given them a lot of cheek.

A REMARKABLE REUNION
from KING SOCCER October 1955

The time: Thursday the eleventh of Augustm 1955, three p.m.

The place: Sydney Cricket Ground No. 2. We were there to see the Australian team in training for their forthcoming match against South China to be played at the Sydney Sports Ground the following Saturday.

What do you do if you want to have a good time during a mostly dull training session? You go behind Bill Henderson's goal. For Bill is just about the brightest fellow in the game. His witty remarks to (and about) everybody keep you in a good mood. A few other people came along people came along to see the boys busy. One of them was Andy Henderson, Senr., Bill's father. This old-timer, who was born in Scotland, is always ready to talk about football. What he does not know about the game is not worth worrying about!

In no time our conversation was about the year 1923, when Henderson Senior represented Australia against ... South China.

"Mind you," said Andy, "these fellows could play football. Their centre forward, Lee Wai Tong, was a real champion. Could this bloke score!"

A few minutes later the neatly dressed Chinese team arrived at the ground, led by their coach. His name? Lee Wai Tong ...

The two old rivals shook hands. Big smiles and plenty of friendly words. Henderson: "Do you remember that game Metropolis versus South China, back in 1923? You played centre-forward and I was centre-half. We drew three-all. You scored all the Chinese goals and you received the medal for the best player on the field."

Lee: "Do I remember! That was a terrific game. Look at your watch. You see? It is three o'clock. And today is the eleventh of August. So it is at this very moment 22 years ago that we kicked off."

Henderson: "That's right, old boy. How time flies. By the way, do you see that red-headed goalie there? That is my son. He plays against your boys now."

Lee: "And do you see that fellow there? That is my son, who plays centre-forward for South China now. Amazing, isn't it?"

The sons were called on to the scene. Two proud fathers and two smiling sons made a team of four happy sportsmen. Who wants more proof of the value of sport for international friendship and understanding.

The football family Henderson ...
Andy Junior (left), Andy Senior (middle) and Bill

NATIONAL SOCCER LEAGUE PREVIEWS ROUND 26

SOUTH MELBOURNE
V
MARCONI
at Bob Jane Stadium
Friday 5 April

SOUTH can complete the finals equation with a win at home to the confident Stallions, effectively ending the chances of both the Spirit and the Power.

The South side were in a punishing mood last week against the Wolves and the form of Vaughn Coveny could be an ominous sign for other finalists should they qualify.

It's too little too late for the Stallions though and unless they can pull off a four goal win and both the Spirit and Power lose then the curtain will draw on a courageous season.

Quite possibly the final game for coach Lee Sterrey, so expect plenty of emotion from the visitors

Players to watch:
Petkovic, Coveny (South)
Longo, Maisano (Stallions)

X-Factor: After leaving the Stallions unceremoniously last season South boss Eddie Krncevic will be pumping his side up for a clash that is sure to be physical.

Prediction: Draw for South to sneak into finals.

NORTHERN SPIRIT
V
WOLLONGONG WOLVES
at North Sydney Oval
Sunday 7th April

SPIRIT fought hard against the Knights last week, and will need to show just as much attacking resolve this week. Not only do the Spirit have to dispose of the Wolves but they also need the Power to slip up against the Knights and the Stallions to upset South Melbourne.

The odds aren't on their side but they're sure to go down fighting. Substitute Stephen Dobbie who as a substitute came on and scored a double last week is sure to start this week, and the Spirit will be attacking right from the outset.

Players to watch:
Bell, Thomas (Spirit)
Sharland, Blake (Wolves)

X-Factor: The Wolves don't look like putting up much of a fight if their effort against South last week is any indication.

Prediction: Spirit get the points.

PARRAMATTA POWER
V
MELBOURNE KNIGHTS
at Parramatta Stadium
Sunday 7th April

A DO or die match for the Power, who are coming off the bye following on from their win the previous week against Sydney United.

Have shown more of a willingness to attack in recent weeks, and have been rewarded on the scoreboard.

Still uncertainty as to whether this is defender Alex Tobins last match, if the Power don't make it to the finals, and if so the Parramatta side will be looking to send the tireless veteran out a winner.

The Knights were cruising against the Spirit last week, and Andrew Marth is sure to be drumming into his players the need to be switched on for the full 90 minutes, especially with the finals only a week away.

Players to watch:
Langdon, Bennett (Power)
Porter, Sulemani (Knights)

X-Factor: Young Power keeper Liam Reddy is yet to be fully tested, but can expect a baptism of fire against the Knights.

Prediction: Power by one

Parramatta Power coach David Mitchell ... Sunday's vital clash against the Knights could be his last.

ADELAIDE CITY FORCE
V
SYDNEY UNITED
at Hindmarsh Stadium
Sunday 7th April

TWO teams that have had their seasons ruined by injuries and player transfers. Not only have they struggled on the field, but off it with both clubs hit hard by financial problems.

That aside, this game will showcase plenty of up and coming talent, with the likes of Pantelis, Fyfe and Tunbridge for City and Milan Bosnar and Christian Cevenini for United.

City will be buoyed by their victory against the Kingz last week, whilst United showed plenty of fight against Newcastle.

In what has been a disappointing season for Branko Culina he will spend the last game of the season watching his side from the grandstands.

Players to watch:
Cunico, Bilokapic (United)
Karlovic, Pantelis (City Force)

X-Factor: Watch for the "old dog" Mendez to teach some of the "new dogs" some tricks.

Prediction: Draw

OLYMPIC SHARKS
V
FOOTBALL KINGZ
at Toyota Park
Sunday7th April

ANOTHER disappointing season for the New Zealand side with the Kingz resigned to the wooden spoon regardless of the result in this one.

The Sharks will be looking at hanging on to third spot with a win here, and will be looking for Milicic, to get more of the ball after only a week back after spending time on the sidelines.

Despite taking an early lead against the Glory last week, Olympic didn't really threaten and seem to have lost that spark that was present a couple of months back.

As well as looking to re-unite that here, they won't lack any motivation after the Kingz upset them 3-1 last time they met.

Players to watch:
Wilson, Juric (Olympic)
Urlovic, Ngata (Kingz)

X-Factor: Olympic will be looking for a lift heading into the finals, and a goal-fest in front of their home fans could well be the tonic.

Prediction: Sharks by a few.

BRISBANE STRIKERS
V
PERTH GLORY
at Ballymore Oval
Sunday 7th April

NORMALLY, first versus fourth would capture the imagination but in this instance the match is merely a tune-up for the semis.

Perth sewed up the minor premiership a few weeks ago but Brisbane, who sit in equal-fourth with the Melbourne Knights, would dearly ove to put one over the team considered the nation's finest on the eve of the Finals.

After starting the season with a hiss and a roar, the Strikers have in recent weeks struggled, last week plunging to an unlikely defeat at Marconi.

A win for the home side would be a huge boost to the side's confidence but should they collapse, don't expec them to last too long in the semis.

Players to watch:
Alagich, Rech (Brisbane)
Despotovski, Mori (Perth
X-Factor:
State of mind.
Prediction:
Draw

NSL SCOREBOARD

WOLVES 1

C Anthopoulos 33'

SOUTH 4

C Boutsianis 3', V Coveny 38' 52' 78'

Referee: Simon Micallef

Wolves: D Anastasiadis (gk), G Souris, A Ceccoli, R Stanton, S Young, N Sekulovski, C Anthopoulos, D Huxley, B Blake (-73'), D Mennillo (-55'), D Wells (-40'); Subs: A Castro (+40'), B Sullivan (+73'), G Sharland (+55'), S Whalan (gk).
South: M Petkovic (gk), S Iosifidis, F De Amicis, M Durakovic, S Panopoulos, V Coveny, P Trimboli (-74'), R Sekulovski, M Murdocca (-83'), P Kisnorbo, C Boutsianis (-80'); Subs: J Bacak (+74'), V Lia (+83'), N Sabljak (+80') E Galekovic (gk)
Crowd: 2,012 **Venue:** WIN Stadium

KINGZ 1

P Urlovic 31'

ADELAIDE 2

L Pantelis 25', N Budin 35'
Referee: Neil Fox

Kingz: S Bishop (gk), J Perry, P Urlovic (-80), A Vlahos, H Ngata, J Markovski, M Burton, R Hooker, C Banks (-54'), C Jackson, S Douglas; Subs: L Osman (-80'), J Campbell (-54'), H Miyazawa (gk), C Wylie
Adelaide: A Cagalj, M Kemp, I Fyfe, A Kovacevic, L Pantelis, C Veart, A Vidmar (-19'), S Tunbridge, K Rees, I Karlovic, N Budin; Subs: R Saraceno (+19' -80'), A Goulding (+80'), A Pellegrino, D Godley (gk)

Crowd: 2,282 **Venue:** Ericsson Stadium

MARCONI 3

N Tome 17'/58'/63'

STRIKERS 2

K Trajanovski 33'/57'
Referee: Perry Mur

Stallions: 1 M Turnbull (gk) 2 M Beauchamp 4 A Costanzo 5 D Longo 6 C Care 10 J Maisano (-77') 11 N Tome (-69') 13 S Webb 15 R Brownlie 16 R Bove 17 J Afkos (-61') Subs: 12 S Bozinovski (+61') 22 A Brosque (+69') 23 C Gibson (+77') 30 B Catlin (gk)
Strikers: 1 J Kearton (gk) 2 R Alagich 3 S Stefanutto 4 J McKain 5 S McLaren 6 P Grierson (-68') 7 F Rech 8 A Webber (-85') 10 K Trajanovski 11 J Carbone 18 L Drake (-78') Subs: 15 M McKay (+68') 17 M Baird (+85') 19 J Rose (+78') 30 N Coe (gk)

Crowd: 2,012 **Venue**: Marconi Stadium

PERTH 2

N Mrdja 35', B Hassell 46'

SHARKS 1

A Milicic 07'

Referee: Mark Shield

Glory: 1 J Petkovic (gk) 2 M Horsley 3 J Harnwell 7 S Miller 8 B Maloney 9 A Edwards 12 B Hassell (-80') 15 E Aldrighi Junior 18 S Pryce 23 D Tarka 26 N Mrdja (-69') Subs: 11 M Garcia (+80') 16 D Mori (+69') 17 G Faria 30 V Matassa (gk)
Sharks: 1 C Bolton (gk) 2 S Laybutt 7 L Wilson (-69') 8 T Pondeljak 10 T Halpin (-83') 11 J North 19 A Milicic 23 A Packer 24 A Durante (-62') 27 H Ishida 28 A Juric Subs: 4 P Kohler (+62') 6 W Srhoj (+83') 9 D Macallister (+69') 30 B Hughes (gk)
Crowd: 11,579 **Venue:** Perth Oval

KNIGHTS 2

A Da Costa 43', K Marusic 61'

SPIRIT 2

S Dobbie 66'/73'
Referee: Brett Hugo

Knights: 1 M John (gk) 3 R Vargas 4 S Ognenovski 5 S Horvat 6 A Marth (-66') 8 K Marusic (-77') 9 J Porter 10 A Da Costa 16 A Kiratzoglou 18 A Vargas 25 I De Jesus (-83') Subs: 11 X Sulemani (+83') 13 I Jolic (+77') 19 A Pelikan (+66') 30 D McGrath (gk)
Spirit: 1 L Acevski (gk) 3 S Bell 4 N Spencer 5 R Trajkovski (-68') 6 S Thomas 8 C Foster 9 A Cervinski 13 M Stergiopoulos 14 M Cartwright 19 R Griffiths (-58') 21 A Griffiths (-93'+) Subs: 7 A McDermott (+68') 12 J Hutchinson (+93'+) 16 S Dobbie (+58') 30 J Rex (gk)
Crowd: 4,262 **Venue**: Knights Stadium

SYDNEY UNITED 1

C Menapi 74'

NEWCASTLE 1

A Moreira 91' pen

Referee: Matthew Breeze

Sydney United: 28 V Knezevic (gk) 3 V Savoca 9 G Mendez 13 A Deur (-91'+) 14 G Talevski (-46') 16 C Menapi 17 P Bilokapic 18 D Watkins 21 M Jedinak (-74') 22 M Bosnar 29 C Cevenini Subs: 6 Michael Cunico (+74') 12 B Santalab (+46') 24 S Sinozic (+91'+) 1 S Minovski (gk)
Newcastle: 1 D Beltrame (gk) 3 A Roberts 4 C Zoricich 6 M Bingley 9 J Griffiths 11 P Tsekenis 12 S Baillie 13 M Blagojevic 16 J Schirripa (-57') 17 E Masi (-70') 22 R Middleby Subs: 7 T Dodd (+57') 8 M Wilson 25 A Moreira (+70') 20 B Swancott (gk)
Crowd: 1,580 **Venue:** Sydney United Sports Centre

POWER

BYE

NATIONAL SOCCER LEAGUE:
Standings at Round 25

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
1 Perth Glory	23	16	6	1	51	22	54
2 Newcastle United	24	10	12	2	33	21	42
3 Olympic Sharks	23	11	4	8	32	22	37
4 Brisbane Strikers	23	10	6	7	39	32	36
5 Melbourne Knights	23	11	3	9	41	37	36
6 South Melbourne	23	9	6	8	27	21	33
7 Parramatta Power	23	9	4	10	31	30	31
8 Northern Spirit	23	8	7	8	31	37	31
9 Marconi Stallions	23	8	6	9	31	33	30
10 Wollongong Wolves	23	6	7	10	26	38	25
11 Sydney United	23	5	6	12	25	36	21
12 Adelaide City Force	23	4	8	11	26	37	20
13 Kingz FC	23	3	5	15	26	53	14

LEADING SCORERS

17	MORI Damian	Perth Glory
13	FOSTER Paul	Brisbane Strikers
12	CARDOZO Pablo	Spirit
11	BROWNLIE Royce	Marconi
11	DA COSTA Antonio	Knights
11	DESPOTOVSKI Bobby	Perth Glory
11	MILICIC Ante	Olympic Sharks
11	PORTER Joel	Knights
10	GRIFFITHS Joel	Newcastle
9	MOREIRA Alex	Newcastle
9	RECH Fernando	Brisbane Strikers
9	URLOVIC Paul	Kingz FC
8	MENAPI Commins	Sydney United
8	YOUNG Stuart	Wolves
7	MALONEY Brad	Perth Glory
7	TUNBRIDGE Scott	Adelaide City
6	COVENY Vaughan	South
6	MAISANO John	Marconi
6	TOME Norman	Marconi
6	TRAJANOVSKI Kris	Brisbane Strikers
5	BUONAVOGLIA John	Power
5	CERVINSKI Adrian	Spirit
5	MACALLISTER Dylan	Olympic
5	MASI Esala	Newcastle
5	PONDELJAK Tom	Olympic
5	BOUTSIANIS, Con	South
4	BAIRD Michael	Strikers
4	CARBONE John	Strikers
4	DE JESUS Ivo	Knights
4	HARNWELL Jamie	Perth Glory
4	HOLMAN Brett	Power
4	MIDDLEBY Robbie	Newcastle
4	NGATA Heremaia	Kingz FC
4	TRIMBOLI Paul	South
4	VLAHOS Andy	Kingz FC
3	ARAMBASIC Zlatko	Power
3	BACAK Joe	South
3	CARLE Nick	Olympic
3	DEUR Ante	Sydney United
3	GOUTZIOULIS George	Kingz FC
3	GULESSARIAN Kevo	Stallions
3	HUTCHINSON John	Spirit
3	MARTH Andrew	Knights
3	MCBREEN Daniel	Newcastle
3	NORTH Jade	Olympic
3	SEKULOVSKI Naum	Wolves

Berries struggle to score and fail to deliver

By Mick CHILI

BY THEIR own high standards Canterbury Marrickville have failed to deliver this season.

In many ways the season has mirrored their efforts in last season's Premier League competition, excluding their astonishing end of season run which saw them contest the finals.

"In a lot of ways it was similar to last season," confirms Captain Greg Collins.

"We had a change of coach mid-season, but probably our biggest downfall was that we missed too many chances.

"Not making the finals is disappointing we just haven't capitalised on our opportunities its been that simple."

The Berries made everyone sit up and take notice with their 5-2 drubbing of last season's Minor Premiers Blacktown in the first round, but have since failed to capitalise on the positive start.

Laki Konistis was introduced midway through the season, hoping to arrest the form slump, and the side went on a four game unbeaten streak.

"He revived the team, and we were feeling more confident about ourselves," explains Collins.

Once again though the goal-scoring curse that had plagued their season, once again re-surfaced and the Berries found themselves in a hole that they couldn't dig themselves out of.

"We've missed a lot of one on ones this season, and against the top sides you just can't afford to do that," Collins says.

"It does affect the confidence of the side, especially when the opposition comes back down the other end and scores.

"We've tended to drop our heads when we've conceded goals, that's been the other problem."

Collins was hampered throughout last season with various injuries, and even missed part of the pre-season recovering.

However his performances this season have highlighted his importance at the back for Marrickville in what has been a frustrating year.

"I've definitely been more consistent this year," the Berries Captain comments.

"Last year I might have had one good game, then been quiet the next whereas this year, I've been involved and competitive every game."

And with the finals nearly upon us, who do you fancy for the title?

"It will be close, but I think Parramatta are the team to beat, the most impressive thing with them is that they play as a team, not as individuals, so they'll be tough."

AC UNITED NOT AFRAID OF ANYONE

By Mick CHILI

THIS season's Super League surprise packets would no doubt have to be AC United.

The Western-Sydney club currently hold down first spot, equal with competition favourites the Rockdale Suns, Stanmore Hawks and Manly Warringah.

Whilst their current form has surprised most people this season, it hasn't surprised the players who are well aware of each other's ability.

"Yeah, things are going well, a much better start then what we had last season," explains midfielder Ben Price.

Indeed, AC had a terrible start to the last season's Super League competition which ended up costing them a spot in the finals.

It was a mid to late run towards the end of last season, which saw them come within a few points of an unlikely finals appearance in only their first year in the competition.

With the pressure on them to repeat last years solid effort, the boys from AC have carried over last year's confidence.

Last weekend's 3-3 draw with high-flyers Rockdale was a reflection of how competitive United will be this season.

In a game that many viewed as a grudge match, United showed that they could more than match it with their more fancied opponents.

Asked if they feared anyone in the competition and Price was straightforward.

"We're not afraid of any team," he bluntly states.

"We've beaten the top teams before and last year we beat every finalist except for Bankstown.

"We're not intimidated and I think it's other teams that underestimate us that costs them."

The 23-year-old Price's return to the first grade side is a valuable boost for United, and after missing the majority of last season with a hand injury, the midfielder couldn't wait to get back out there.

"I'm just so glad to get back out there and be playing again," he says.

"I strained my hamstring during pre-season, and missed a game but made it back in time for our first game."

And no doubt so to was coach Paul Carter who sees Price as a key player in his plans this season.

"I think Ben Price will be a player to keep your eye on this season," he told Soccer Today.

Price though was playing down his role in what is a somewhat no frills side.

"Whilst we don't have the best players in the league or play the most attractive soccer we all work hard for each other.

"I think that's where our main strength lies in that our spirit is probably higher than most other teams, and it's definitely something that helps gets us through matches."

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CANTERBURY STRUGGLING IN SUPER YOUTH LEAGUE

CANTERBURY Marrickville's youth sides have had a mixed start to the Super Youth competition, with sides filling the top and bottom of their respective leagues.

Youth convenor and current first grade coach Laki Konistis concedes that the structure of the competition is not in favour of the club.

"We're on the back foot when it comes to attracting

players to the club, because the best players want to play in the Premier Youth League," Konistis told *Soccer Today*.

"We've had to pick up kids after the selections for the Premier Youth sides have been chosen."

Konistis will be hoping the youth sides can win promotion for next season with a strong showing this season.

So far it has been tough going, especially for the 13s who have only managed one point out of their four matches.

Coached by the husband and wife team of Theo and Thekla, the side possesses a number of last seasons under 12s side.

"They're assembled a strong squad, and despite the tentative start I think they will hold their own this season," says Konistis.

Players that Konistis mentions to keep an eye out for in the 13s are Mitchell Coote, Johama Koukoumas and Chaddi El-Hage.

Like the 13s side the Marrickville under 14s have had an uneasy start to the season and are yet to register a point.

But Konistis is quick to point out that it will take for this new-look squad to come together.

"It's been a real baptism of fire for coach Dennis Fragogiannis," he says.

"Whilst it's been hard for other coaches who have had to work with new squads, the only thing that Dennis had to work with at the start of the season were the soccer balls because he didn't have any players.

"They were always going to do it tough and its going to take some time, but come the second round of the competition you should see them producing some results."

The 15s are the Berries best performed side and are currently in fourth position.

Players that have impressed for the side so far include David Psaroudis, Gary Luddy, Michael Espinoz and Paul Karamalakis.

The side have few weaknesses and despite going down 4-0 to Bankstown last round, will no doubt prove to be very competitive.

Up until the last round Canterbury Marrickville's 17s side were undefeated, and with plenty of experience and talent in the side are expected to do well.

They have a number of boys who were a part of the Berries under 19s Premier League squad, including keeper Dejan Josipovic. Other members who are expected to do well include Pablo Verdugo and George Iliopoutos.

They are coached by yet another husband and wife team of Raul and Alicia Verdugo, who have been with the club for a number of years, with Raul looking after the Marrickville 15s last season.

With a number of those boys making up the 17s this season, they will be looking to consolidate on their positive start and make the transition to the senior squads for next season.

By Adam LETO

CAMDEN TIGERS YOUTH SET STANDARD

THE CAMDEN Tigers have so far been the benchmark club in the Division One Youth League.

With the season only four weeks old, the Tigers are the front runners in the club championship and look a good chance to be promoted next season.

They have also had two perfect days during the season picking up 12 points out of the 12 available in matches against Parramatta City in round two and Mt.Druit the following week.

"Obviously its been a good start, and two 12 point days have certainly helped but it's a long season," youth convenor Fred Mackechnie told *Soccer Today*.

The 13s have made a solid start to the season with two wins and two draws. They're coached by Tigers first grader Alex Prophet, and with what they've shown so far are definite contenders for a top four place.

"They're learning every week, most of them are new to this level so they'll only get better as the season goes on," says Mackechnie.

The 13s currently hold a share of the top spot along with the Illawarra Lions, Schofield Scorpions and Ryde City.

They have the opportunity to leapfrog the Lions when they travel to Illawarra next week.

The 14s were weakened by the departure of a number of key players from last season. Having won the 13s competition last season, this was always going to be somewhat of a natural progression for what was a very talented group.

This season a number of those boys combined some new recruits have shown that they have the potential to re-claim another title.

They currently sit in equal first spot with Granville Association and have re-grouped after going down 2-1 to

MSC Liverpool in the first game of the season.

"They're getting better every week, and look to be a really consistent side this season," explains Mackechnie.

"They're coached by Steve Bowers who has done a great job with them and they're playing some really nice football."

In an impressive start by the Tigers, one of the stand-outs has been the performances of their 15s side that have really set the competition alight.

Led by coach Trevor Davis they have won all four games, are averaging five goals per game and have conceded only two goals this season.

They have certainly put on a show so far, and haven't taken their foot off the accelerator as they continue to knock them in from all over the park.

"They've been the surprise packet this year and have looked really good," Mackechnie says.

"The 14s finished third last season and they've picked some good players so they'll be hard to beat this season."

The 15s have taken some of the limelight away from the 17s who have also excelled in the early rounds of the competition.

With three wins and a draw, they a point clear of Mt.Druit and Dulw Hill.

Coached by President Vince Pesa the Tigers 17s should feature pron nently in the post season.

Overall, an obviously pleased Mackechnie explains the reasons behind their on-field success.

"We just have a really good bun of kids who are all mates," he say

"We had a fairly successful trip t Canberra in the pre-season, to ge everyone used to each other, that something we do every year.

"The atmosphere is just terrific v great co-operation from the kids, parents, as well as great coaches.

By Adam LETO

THE BRIAN BROWN COLUMN

WHAT A GREAT EASTER!

WHAT a great Easter!

I watched two game of football on Saturday, two games on Sunday and four matches on Monday, it doesn't get better than that.

The two games on Saturday were the Blacktown 19s and our first grade game against Penrith, two very open and attacking matches.

We got the right result in first grade but lost the 19s.

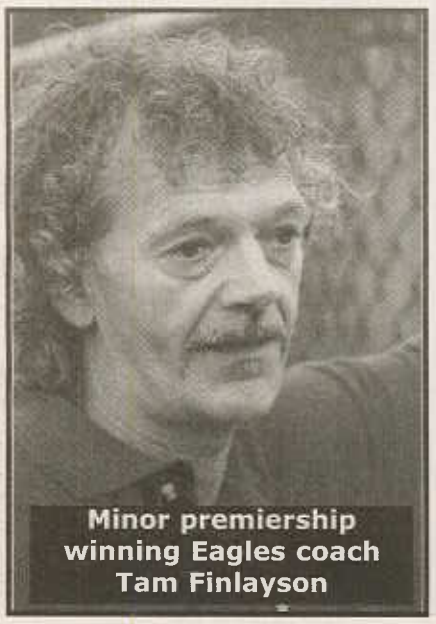
On Sunday I watched MSC Liverpool play Sydney Uni in the Super League.

Stuart Porter's Students defeated Brian Dene's team 4-1 on a surface that was not the best.

My next game was Leichhardt Tigers versus Belconnen and what a tussle this was.

Both teams were desperate for the points and secure a finals berth.

There were not many goalscoring opportunities in the game, it was more of a midfield battle with both defences on top.



Minor premiership winning Eagles coach Tam Finlayson

Plenty of commitment from all the players and a draw was probably a fair result.

It was also a great result for Blacktown as we now move into third spot on the ladder.

On the other hand it was not so good for Fairfield because if Belconnen beat St.George on Saturday then Fairfield will miss out on the finals.

IT WAS very clear watching the two games that the standard of players in the Premier League is much higher than that of those in the Super League.

Their speed, passing and ball movement was a lot more fluent and effective the Premier League matches.

ON MONDAY I watched the Blacktown Premier Youth League sides play Leichhardt at the Gabbie.

I really enjoyed all the games from 13s to 17s with each producing something different.

Four players that stood out were Brendan Maroney in the 14s, Harris Gaitatzis in the 15s and Brian Vanega and Dean Storey in the 17s.

These boys all look to have a big future in football with plenty of hard work and a little bit of luck.

I DID see something happen in the 13s that I felt was not in the spirit of the game and in my opinion the Leichhardt coach embarrassed one of his players.

With Leichhardt leading 2-1 and Blacktown throwing everything at them in search of an equaliser, the Tigers keeper (who is not the tallest keeper I've seen) was having a blinder stopping everything the Blacktown side were throwing at him.

Bonnyrigg White Eagles celebrate last season's Grand Final victory. Who will it be in 2001-02?

The Demons were then awarded a free-kick 30 metres from goal and that's when the madness began.

Leichhardt substituted their keeper and replaced him with an outfield player who looked twice his side from the grandstand.

The free-kick went over the crossbar and the Leichhardt coach then replaced another player straight away and brought his keeper back on.

Leichhardt won the game 2-1 but I felt they abused the interchange rule which should be used so that all kids can get a game not to win the game at all costs.

FINALLY I would like to congratulate Tam Finlayson and all the players and staff at Melita on winning the Minor Premiership.

Last year I sent the players at Penrith a case of Crown Lagers for defeating Melita which allowed us to win the Minor Premiership.

I'm looking forward to the finals in the next few weeks with all the teams very equal it's anyone's guess as to who will play in the Grand Final.

Unfortunately no beers are being sent to anyone this year.

Young Knight Natsioulas aims to get some experience in Victorian state league

By Melina BOURSINOS

IT'S a cold dreary afternoon in Melbourne's Western Suburbs and a small group of parents and friends have gathered to watch the stars of tomorrow play.

As I watch goal after goal being scored, I feel a sense of relief. I am certain that the future of Australian Soccer is safe if we continue to produce players of this calibre.

One of these talents is 17 year old Bill Natsioulas.

He recently signed a professional contract with the Premier League club Bentleigh Greens and is being targeted by both NSL clubs in Victoria.

"I began playing with Clayton Inter because my whole family was involved in soccer," Natsioulas told *Soccer Today*.

"I scored 107 goals for the under sevens.

"I represented Victoria in the under 14s.

"I also played for Knox City and Bentleigh as an amateur in their reserve team."

The striker was given his first big break last year when he was asked by the Melbourne Knights to join their Youth team.

Surprisingly the number 10 first trialed for Greek-backed Club South Melbourne and was overlooked.

"South weren't interested, but I didn't really get a chance to show what I could do," he said.

"There were around a hundred kids there and we were given 15 minutes to dribble around some cones and another 15 minutes to play keepings off.

"The Knights had a much better system.

"We played four to five games, so they could see our strengths and weaknesses."

In his first season for the Knights Bill has exceeded all expectations.

He has been an integral part of the team's success this season and has been spotted by first team coach Andrew Marth.

His soccer has developed immensely and he has shone through in almost every game.

"I've found the transition into youth team football quite easy," he says.

"Every time I've played up front against the top team South Melbourne I've scored.

"I've trained with the first team and played with them in two friendly matches against Green Gully and St Albans.

Bill Natsioulas (right) in action for Knights youth

"The older players offer you advice and you learn just by watching the way they move."

While he awaits for the youth team finals in May the tall forward has decided to return to his old club to play Premier League football and improve his strength and fitness.

Not surprisingly the Cypriot-back club welcomed him with open arms and he is now ready to test his ski at a different level.

"In the Premier League players p in the hard tackles, it's more physical," Natsioulas said.

"But it will help me gain experien for the NSL.

"I think Bentleigh have a good chance of winning the title.

"They have done well so far.

"They're equal first with Green G and that's because they play simpl soccer.

"In the last three games they've scored three goals inside the first minute.

"For me their stand out player is Nilo, he is definitely something spe cial. You can just see it."

As he looks ahead, the young gu keen to follow in the footsteps of Australia International Brett Emert and this appears to be a strong po sibility with early signs indicating h has a bright future ahead of him.

SOCCER VICTIMS IN TV SHAKE-UP

SOCCER has become a casualty of the pay-TV shake-up, with Optus pulling the plug on C7 Sport, the channel that covers the National Soccer League.

The contract was due to expire yesterday, but Optus switched off last Thursday, preventing the broadcasting of the weekend's games.

The decision raises doubts about domestic soccer coverage, with the NSL finals due to start in a fortnight.

C7 offered to provide Optus with free coverage of the NSL weekend games, but the pay-TV company rejected the offer, leaving NSL chairman Ian Knop deeply frustrated.

"The public are disappointed, especially if they've payed for the coverage," Knop said. "At such short notice it's really poor. It's disappointing that soccer is caught in the crossfire."

Seven took over TV rights to the NSL from SBS in the late 1990s in a 10-year deal. C7's future became shaky late in 2001 when they lost the rights to cover AFL to a News Corp, Packer group and Foxtel consortiu

This month, Foxtel and Optus str a deal that gave Optus access to Foxtel's Fox Sport channels from April, a monopoly that Knop said i concerning.

Knop said Seven and C7 had assured him that the NSL finals would be broadcast.

Victoria names state train-on squad

VICTORIA representative coach Harry Chalkitis has named a 30 man squad for training sessions on the 3rd and 10th of April before whittling the numbers down to a match squad for the April 20th game against Queensland.

The squad has been selected with advice and input from Premier League coaches and looks to have a great deal of depth.

The first two training sessions will be very competitive as players push to be a part of the squad that will play against the Northern visitors.

"It was a tough decision to select the top thirty players by their performances so far this year - and it is only going to get harder as the big game draws nearer" said Chalkitis. "We are taking this game and the future State games very seriously and hope to be playing in front of a big crowd at Bob Jane, especially onsidering that entry is free".

Jim Kourtis

The train-on squad is as follows:

Robert Brian (Green Gully)
Bojo Jevjevic (Fitzroy City)
Jim Kourtis (Bentleigh Greens)
Ross Antoniadis (Altona East)
Colin Azzopardi (Green Gully)
Theo Constantinou (Bentleigh Greens)
Stelios Drakos (Bentleigh Greens)
Dean Fak (Green Gully)
Jean-Paul Knezevic (Port Melbourne)
Zlatko Mihajlovic (Fitzroy City)
Serdar Pir (Port Melbourne)
Jason Vukadin (Whittlesea Stallions)
Chris Emsovski (Preston)
Tom Karapatsos (Bentleigh Greens)
Paul Magdic (Whittlesea Stallions)
Doug Mladenovic (Altona Magic)
Cameron Pino (Port Melbourne)
Sam Poutakidis (Port Melbourne)
Sava Rusmir (Bulleen)
Berkan Sakaci (Bulleen)
Mark Silic (Whittlesea Stallions)
Tony Sterjovski (Fawkner)
Arthur Tsirtsakis (Port Melbourne)
Henry Velkovski (Green Gully)
Vas Kalogerakos (Whittlesea Stallions)
Juan Nilo (Bentleigh Greens)
Peter Psarros (Port Melbourne)
Joe Spitteri (Fawkner)
Nick Tsaltas (Green Gully)
Peter Kakos (Heidelberg)

The clubs with the largest representation are Port Melbourne (6), Bentleigh Greens (5) and Green Gully (5). Premier League new boys Whittlesea Stallions and Fitzroy City have 4 and 2 representatives respectively.

Mark Silic in his days at now-defunct NSL club Collingwood

The final squad that is named for the game against Queensland will not necessarily be the same squad that travels to NSW and South Australia later in the year. Each squad will be selected with form players and tactics in mind.

Training will be held in venues around Melbourne to encourage spectators to have a look at the Premier League's best in action.

Dates and venues will be announced shortly.

Courtesy VSF

SOCCER TODAY - available every Thursday

Spirit ace Acevski settling into new home

By Adam LETO

NORTHERN Spirit number one Lupce Acevski is not one to take chances.

The Spirit custodian is not the flashiest keeper in the league but he certainly gets the job done.

It came as a surprise when talking to Acevski over the phone to hear the blaring of the Randwick Races in Sydney in the background.

Could it be that the cool and steady keeper is in fact a high-wired, live on the edge punter from way back?

It would certainly go against my own and probably most others perception of the man.

"Nah mate I'm not a gambler," Acevski reassured me, at the same time maintaining my own confidence in being able to judge a book by its cover.

"My best man for my wedding has come down from Melbourne, and he's got a tip that's all.

"I haven't had a bet yet, I'm not much of a gambler."

Ah, that's better, those are the words I've been waiting to hear.

But before I go into how calculated his performances have been this season, there are still a few indications that suggest that Acevski is more of a risk-taker then people believe.

Firstly his move across from the Melbourne Knights last year to join with Sydney club the Northern Spirit reflects his willingness perform at the highest level.

Packing up and moving from his place of birth belies the confidence he has in his own ability.

Heading to a new club, a new place, with new people would have to be regarded as a big step, for the tall 24-year old.

"Coming from Melbourne when I was just a part-time player and working another job, to the Spirit where it was full-time professional, I thought was just better for me," Acevski explains.

"Plus they were backed by Glasgow Rangers, had signed some big-name players and were probably the one of the most professional, if not the most professional club in the league.

"There just seemed to be a really big buzz around the place."

That "buzz" continued into pre-season and into the start of the season where he was selected as the first choice keeper for Spirit, turning in some strong performances in the early rounds of the league.

With strong competition for the number one keeping role at the club coming from Paul Henderson, it was a small achievement for the Melbourne import to win the starting spot for the opening rounds.

"It started off really good, I played in the first few rounds of the competition, and then as most people know I did my groin which sidelined me for a while," says Acevski.

"It was frustrating at the time because it was my first real serious injury, as well as being away from everyone at home, and just dying to get out there and play.

"It was a tough time for me, and then when I came back I was dropped from the side so it was hard.

"All I could do was just keep my head down and work hard, and hopefully get another opportunity."

At first it didn't look likely that Acevski would get another opportunity, with Henderson taking command of the number one jersey, and the Spirit showing some strong form.

Then like Acevski, Henderson was struck down by injury giving the newcomer one more chance for glory.

An opportunity that so far he has taken full advantage of.

"Off the park we're good mates and off the park we're good mates," Acevski says of his relationship with Henderson.

"It's my job to beat him and his job to beat me, with the coach deciding who should be the one picked.

"We just go out there to do our best and we get along really well."

Acevski started his playing career with Green Valley in Melbourne before spending a few years at St Albans.

But it was his time spent at Preston that set him on the path to the NSL.

He spent three years with the former NSL club, and in his final year was awarded Victorian keeper of the year.

When his move to the Melbourne Knights was completed the following season, Acevski, had clearer goals then when he had first started out between the sticks.

"I started out on the field and started playing in goals at the age of about 11 or 12," he says.

"I think they only moved me there because I was pretty lazy and didn't run much.

" Winning the goalkeeper of the year award and playing in last year's finals would be the biggest highlights so far.

"Especially playing against and beating Perth last year in the semis, that was a big game.

"There were a few nerves last year, but if I'm there with the Spirit this year there will be no nerves whats ever.

"I feel like I have an old head young shoulders."

Only a few hours before Spirit biggest game of the season again Acevski's former side the Melbour Knights, the Spirit custodian remarkably relaxed.

"To be honest it's quite a good fe ing coming home and to be playing against the Knights in a game th we really need to win, it's pretty bi he understates.

"There's no personal feelings for going into the match.

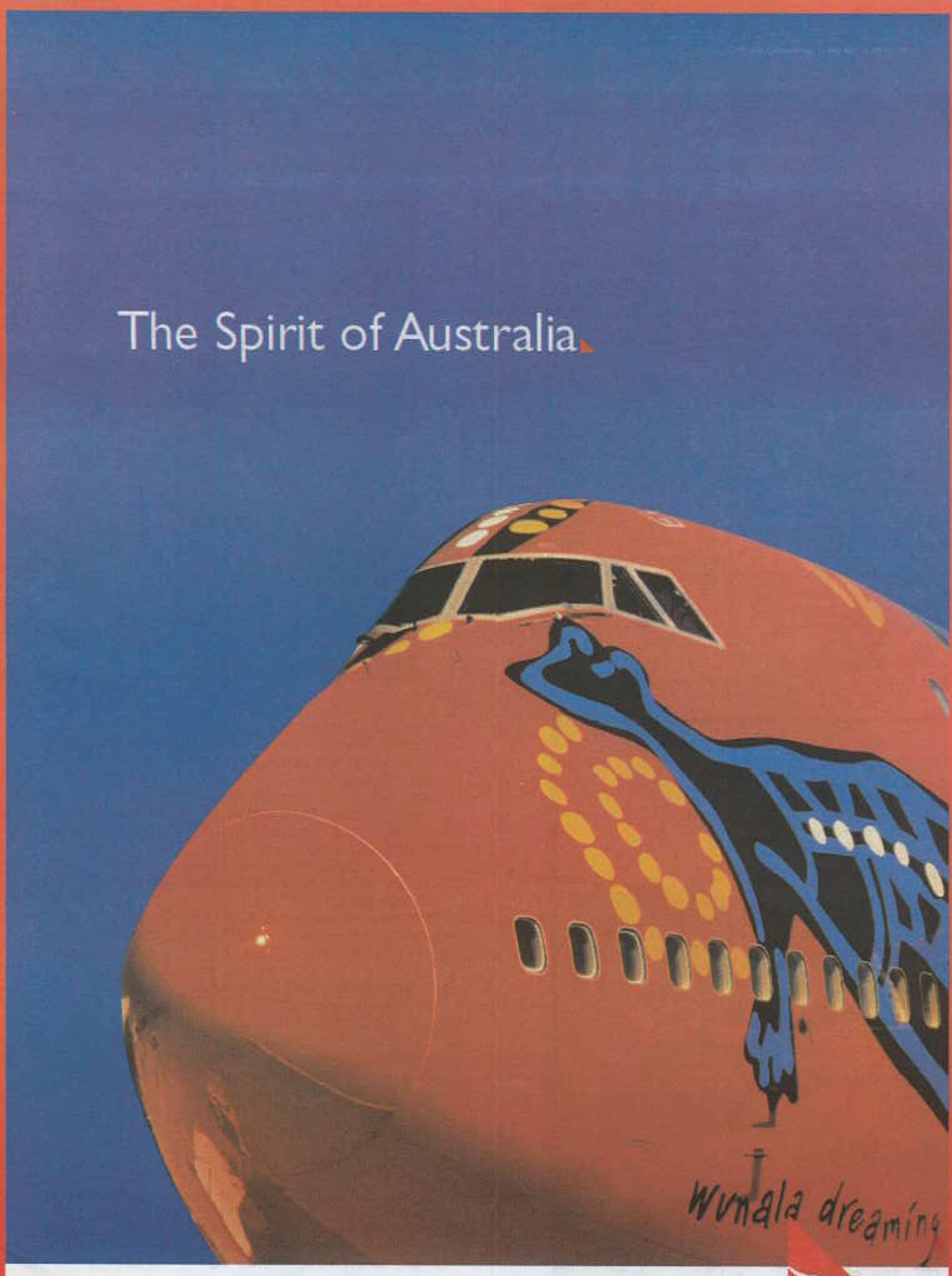
"The last time we played them th absolutely destroyed us so reven would probably the only personal fe ing.

"At the start of the year the atmo phere was brilliant and we had sign some really big players so everyone was confident.

"All the players thought that w make the Top Six convincingly, t although things haven't gone our w it has brought us closer together."

Although throughout his career could be said that Acevski has take risk or two, rest assured that in t biggest game of the year for the Sp he won't be gambling with their s son, even if he is given a tip.

The Spirit of Australia



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THE WOMEN'S GAME

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KERRY has just completed her Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology, a handy qualification for a mature 21-year-old who also happens to look after three kids in her spare time. Derek Royal spoke to Kerry about her life, including being a member of one of sport's best-known cheer squads ...

Words: Derek Royal
Pictures: Tina Asprea

KERRY'S first experience as a cheerleader was quite a big occasion.

It was in 1999 and the venue was Stadium Australia.

A huge crowd packed into the Olympic arena to see a no-holds-barred National Rugby League semi-final.

In something akin to being thrown in at the deep end, Kerry remembers the electric atmosphere and the adrenaline rush of performing in front of 100,000 people.

"It was amazing and very intense," she told *Soccer Today*.

"Especially seeing as I was unfamiliar with everything and didn't really know what I was doing."

But Kerry got through the ordeal - or should we say, the experience - and she's still there, cheering the boys at Toyota Park.

Kerry says that initially she was something of a stop-gap performer, filling in when girls were unavailable.

But last year the 21-year-old was able to commit to joining the cheer-squad fulltime.

"I was really busy studying at Wollongong University," she said.

And what was she studying?

"I've just completed a Bachelor of Science, majoring in Psychology, so that was pretty exciting."

Like many of her fellow Sharkettes, Kerry not only cuts the mustard in the visual stakes, she also has the brains to go with it.

So why psychology?

"I want to get involved with a big company in the human resources field," she says.

"And psychology is an area that deals with issues that you don't normally think about in real life.

"Like how your brain works, how you learn to talk and what side of the brain is engaged at a given moment, it's all very interesting.

"The complexity of the course was quite fascinating."

Kerry also looks after three kids, not hers of course, which means she's probably thankful that she chose to "pysch" as her speciality.

"I've looked after a two-year-old boy since he was three-weeks old," she says.

"I just started Uni when he was born and I knew the theory of things such as how old he should be when he starts walking and talking, all those kind of things.

"With the other kids, they're about 12 and I just spend most of the time running around after them with their sports and basically cooking for them.

So away from the daily grind of kid-minding and study, cheerleading seems to be just the right tonic for a bit of R and R.

And what's the most exciting part about performing with the Sharkettes/Mermaids?

"The most exciting part about the games is when there's a try or a goal scored and the whole crowd goes crazy," Kerry says.

"It's really good because everyone jumps up and down and you can see the excitement and exhiliration on everyone's faces."

So is there a difference between the rugby league crowd that follows the NRL Sharks and the soccer crowd that supports their NSL bretheren?

"One of the differences is at the league there's not really many cheers.

"You might hear 'Come on Sharks' every now and then but at the soccer they have this chant that goes: 'O-lym-pic', O-lym-pic'.

"When we first heard it we didn't know what it was and we all looked at each other and thought: 'what are they saying?'.

Kerry may have just turned 21 a few days ago but it's obvious that with her workload and previous commitments, in many ways she has already Come of Age.

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